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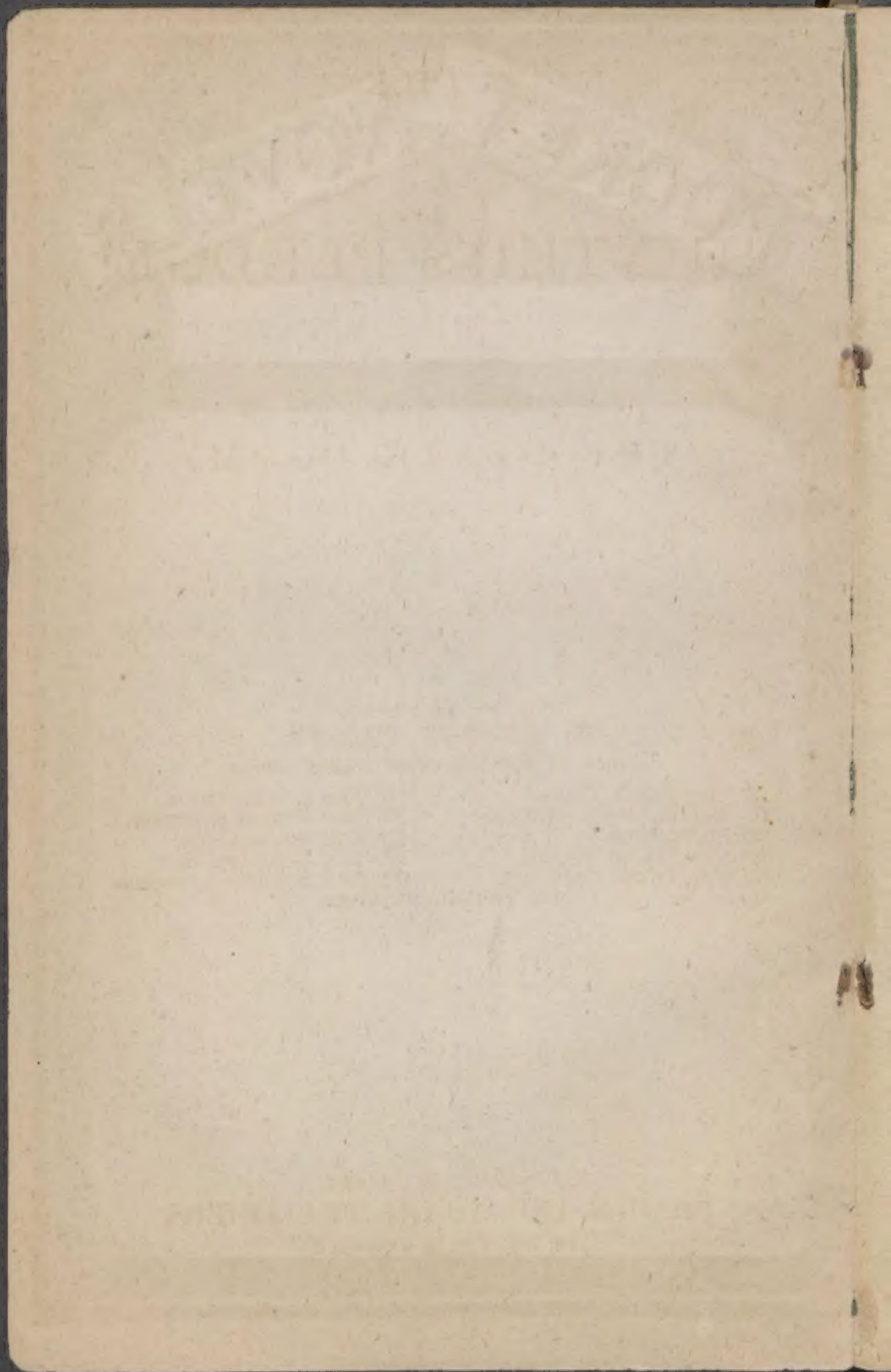
Illuminated.
Ten Cents.

POCKET NOVELS



The Hunter's Pledge. ²³⁸





THE
HUNTER'S PLEDGE:
OR,
THE DEATH DOOM.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING POCKET NOVELS:

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THE HUNTER'S PLEDGE

CHAPTER I.

THE WRONG MAN.

ONLY a shot from the wayside !

Only a small leaden missile, driven from the tube of a rifle by the explosive force of a little "villainous saltpeter;" but it passed through the brain of a man in the full vigor of health and strength, and, in an instant, his soul escaped from its earthly tenement, and went to render its final account.

Not only did the shot kill one man, but it made desolate a pleasant home, and bereaved an unfortunate family, who thus lost a loving and excellent husband and father.

Hardly an hour before, that man had been seated in a cross-road tavern, laughing and joking about the perils of the very place where he had met his death-shot.

Robert Horton was a gentleman in the prime of life, who had emigrated from the East, and had settled in that part of Texas as a land-surveyor and agent. He was not one of the many who had gone to Texas for the purpose of flying from their debts or escaping the punishment due to their crimes; but was a man of good character and position, possessed of a little wealth, and his object in emigrating had been to build up a large landed estate, which might, at some future day, be very valuable.

Although he had been but a short time in Texas, he was already widely known and universally esteemed for the integrity of his character, his close attention to business, his genial disposition, and the easy manner in which he accommodated himself to the habits and prejudices of the rough settlers.

When Mr. Horton stopped at Barham's tavern, he had been

on a business tour into the western part of Texas, surveying and locating lands, examining titles, and attending to his other duties as a land-agent. He was returning with a considerable sum of money in his pocket, and with his pocket-book filled with valuable papers, among which were the title-deeds of a large estate on the Brazos, which he had purchased from a Mexican.

It was near the middle of the afternoon when he reached Barham's, but he had been riding since breakfast without halting, and was glad to stop to rest himself and his horse, and procure refreshment for both.

Barham's tavern was only a rough log building, with a few dirty cabins attached to it, and a large corral for horses and cattle; but it was a tavern, and a good one, in the early Texas acceptance of the term. Besides accommodation for man and beast, it offered to the thirsty wayfarer refreshment in the form of ardent spirits of the most fiery and potent nature. It was, therefore, a favorite resort for the wild and motley population of hunters and pioneers, as well as for travelers in that section.

Even Robert Horton, when he had seen that the wants of his horse were attended to, did not scruple to call for a glass of Cognac, and to invite all who happened to be in the "grocery" to join him. It was the custom of the country, and it was expected that he would do so; if he had not, he would have found himself in the position of the man visiting Little Rock, who went to the bar of the hotel and called for a glass of liquor, when, to his astonishment, as he said, "fourteen men who were sitting around stepped up and 'lowed they'd take sugar in that'n."

Having performed this convivial duty, he at once found himself on terms of entire equality, as well as friendship, with the guests of the tavern, to some of whom he was personally known.

Taken together, they were a fair representation of the Texans of that time, comprising various conditions and qualities of men, from the tall and hardened hunter of the mountains or plains, to the lean and dried-up Mexican, with yellow complexion and crafty eyes. Mr. Horton was the only one whose dress would have been called respectable in older communities,

the others being attired in rudely-fashioned garments of coarse homespun or dressed deerskin.

After the land-agent had exchanged greetings with his friends, and had imparted to them such items of news as he had become possessed of in the course of his travels, the conversation naturally turned on the condition of the country.

The Texans had declared their independence of Mexico; several severe engagements had been fought; the siege of San Antonio was part of the history of the past; but the massacres of Goliad and the Alamo were fresh in the memory of everybody, and furnished a continual theme for indignant comment.

These matters, together with the march of the Mexicans under Santa Anna from the frontier, were duly and largely discussed, with the proper amount of patriotism and an abundance of enthusiasm for the cause of Texas and liberty.

All present participated in the discussion, with the exception of one long and lank old backwoodsman, named Bill Syce, who sat quietly in a corner, sipping his brandy and sugar, and regarding the excited talkers with a vacant stare in his deep, gray eyes.

"I wonder," said the landlord, Pete Barham, when all had fully expressed their opinions, and there had come a pause in the conversation, "why old Bill Syce hain't got nothin' to say onto this yere subjeck. I reckon the brandy has kinder upset him, or p'raps he's thinkin' of j'inin' the Greasers."

"You don't reckon any sech thing, Pete Barham," quickly replied the old man. "When I jine the Greasers, it will be a sorry day fur 'em, 'cause I will jine 'em with a death-hug, sure as shootin'. Tell you what it is, strangers and all, you've been doin' a heap of talkin', but talk is easy, and fightin' is what's wanted now. Fur my part, I mean to jine Ginal Sam Houston as quick as I kin git to him, and I allow to be thar when they put in the big licks. I had a boy murdered at the Alamo, the only human creetur' left to me in the world, and that account has got to be settled."

"Ef old Bill Syce kin do any good thar," said one of the party, with a sneer, "I reckon all the old men and cripples had better go."

"I've a notion, Mister, that you don't know what you're

talkin' about," sharply retorted the landlord. "Thar ain't sech a shot nowhar in these parts as Bill Syce, and I shouldn't like to own the head that he p'inted his rifle at. I was with Old Hickory down to Orleans, when we gin the British sech partic'lar fits, and I ought to know what shootin' is."

"Like enough; but a man may be a powerful good shot, and not wuth much in a reg'lar battle."

"I tell you that Bill Syce will be slayin' the Greasers, while you will be stayin' back here and runnin' your cattle off to the States."

"Tain't wuth makin' a fuss about," said Syce, rising from his seat. "I mean to go with Sam Houston, as quick as I kin get to him, and that's all about it. I've a notion to try my hand, whether I kin do much or little. Squire Horton, do you allow to ride on to Colonel Brooke's, or to stop here to-night?"

"I shall go on, certainly. There will be a moon, and the way is plain."

"Wal, I ain't so sure that it's quite as safe as it mought be. Thar's some hard cases been prowlin' about these parts lately, and thar's a bad place in the road jest afore you come to Pedrocito creek."

"I know the way well enough, and I count myself able to take care of myself. I must go on, for I have no doubt that my family have been uneasy about my long absence."

"I wish you good luck. Come, strangers and all," continued the old man, stepping up to the bar, "will you take a drop of suthin' with me afore I go?"

"Whar's your money, Bill?" pleasantly asked the landlord.

"What sort of a way is that to speak to an old friend, Pete Barham? You know that money and I hain't lived neighbors fur a long while, but I reckon we'll make acquaintance ag'in afore long."

"All right, old chap. If you mean to jine General Houston fur sartin, your bill is settled."

As soon as he had swallowed his liquor, the old man said good-evening to Barham and his guests, remarking that he must get away from there before he got drunk, and shouldered his rifle, and left the tavern.

About half an hour later, Mr. Horton, considering that

himself and his horse were sufficiently rested and refreshed, paid his reckoning and rode away.

He rode slowly at first, for his horse seemed to be still fatigued and somewhat sluggish; but soon there arose in his mind pleasant and anxious thoughts of the dear and loving ones who were awaiting him in his temporary home, and he spurred his steed to a gallop.

Thus he rode until he approached the Pedrocito or Little Peter creek, when he remembered the warning of Bill Syce.

Here the road left the open plain, and went down to the bed of the creek through a rocky pass, bordered on each side by a heavy growth of trees and underbrush. At twilight the pass seemed dark, gloomy and wild enough to be a fit lurking-place for assassins and deadly marauders.

Mr. Horton paused before he entered the pass. What if some one should be lying in wait there to murder and rob him? What would be the feelings of his wife and daughter, who had been waiting for him so long and anxiously, if they should learn that his dead body had been found by the roadside; or, if they should know nothing of his fate, but should wait and listen in vain for his welcome voice, until the terrible certainty should settle down upon them that they were never to see him again? The land-agent was a brave man, but it was no wonder that thoughts like these excited his apprehensions and sent a chill through his blood.

He concluded that it would be best to dash through, relying on his horse to carry him safely beyond the reach of danger, as the probability of being hit would be much reduced if he went at full speed.

He looked to his pistols, therefore, to see that they were in order, and entered the pass.

Hardly had he touched his horse with the spur, when there was a sharp report at the left of the road, a quick, vivid flash, and he fell backward in his saddle, the frightened horse rushing from under him and tearing through the pass at full gallop.

The murdered man fell heavily upon the stones, and never breathed again.

The next moment a man stepped out from among the trees, and approached the dead body.

He was a short, sturdy, and thick-set fellow, looking wild,

dirty, and unkempt, as if he had been lying out in the woods for weeks. He had no covering for his matted red locks, which straggled over his low forehead and into his little gray eyes. His face was nearly covered with a short, stubby beard, of several weeks' growth ; his clothes were in rags, with the exception of his dirty leather hunting-shirt, and his appearance was generally ugly and repulsive. In his left hand he carried a rifle, and in his belt gleamed a sheathless and formidable knife.

"The wrong man, arter all!" he exclaimed, with a horrible oath, when he had attentively scanned the features of Mr. Horten. "I could have swore it was him, as I saw him ridin' along ; but this 'un is older by some years. To think that I've been layin' fur him so long, knowin' that he was to come this way about this time, and had him so sure, with a bead drawed right over his eye—and then to git the wrong man arter all! It's too durned bad! I shall have to let the other chap go now, and wait fur another chance at him ; 'cause here's a dead man in the way, and a hoss gone off to tell about it, and it won't do fur me to be seen about here any more."

Another consideration, however, prevailed over the thought of instant flight. He coolly concluded that he would make the best of a bad job, and avenge himself for his mistake, by rifling the pockets of his victim.

He first took possession of a heavy, double-cased gold watch, and then drew forth a pocket-book, which was so bulky that he judged it to be of considerable value. He also transferred his victim's pistols to his own belt, and relieved his pockets of some loose change in gold and silver.

"I reckon I've made a tol'able good haul," he muttered. "I ought to be well paid, sure enough, fur sech work an' fur sech a disapp'ntment ; but t'other job would have suited me better."

So saying, he turned away, and soon disappeared in the thick woods.

He had been gone but a few moments, when another man came hurrying down into the pass, and the faint light of the newly risen moon revealed the gaunt form and features of Bill Syce.

"I was sartin I heerd a shot," he said, "and this yere man

is what was shot at. It's Squire Horton, in course. I told him to be keerful about this place ; but, when a man is bound to die, nothin' will stop him. This will be a hard lick on his wife and his purty darter, and I wouldn't like to be the man to tell it to 'em. Whoever killed him has robbed him, for his watch is gone, and so are his pistols. I wonder whar the scamp went to ; but it's no use lookin' far him, in these woods, at night. What shall I do about it ? Reckon I'd better go back to Pete Barham's and tell the folks."

The old man was too late in coming to this conclusion, for, while he was meditating, there came several mounted men down the road, and they were upon him before he noticed their approach. They were a portion of the party whom he had left, a short time before, at Barham's tavern, and they at once recognized the body of the murdered man, and arrested Bill Syce as the murderer.

The case seemed plain to them. Here was a man killed, and another man standing over his body. It was true that Bill Syce's rifle was charged, and that nothing belonging to the murdered man was found in his possession ; but he might have reloaded, and he might easily have hidden the plunder. He looked guilty, as a matter of course—all people do, when they are caught in such situations—and he was the only man in sight. Besides, the expressions which he had used at Barham's with regard to this very pass, and with regard to his getting money after a while, though they were then considered harmless and proper enough, were now interpreted as evincing an intention to commit the very deed of which he was accused.

" You ken do jest as you please, gentlemen," said the old backwoodsman, as they mounted him on a horse and tied his hands and legs, preparatory to taking him back to Barham's, there to be placed in durance vile. " You ken do jest as you please, but I wouldn't hev killed Squire Horton fur all the money in Texas. I've had good reason to like him, and I warned him afore he left the tavern. You ken do jest as you please, and I know that the looks of things is kinder ag'inst me, and I shoul ln't wonder ef I'd hev to die for the deed of some sneakin' scamp ; but it's sartin that you've got hold of the wrong man."

CHAPTER II.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?

The residence of Colonel John Brooke was situated at the distance of about five miles from Barham's tavern, on an estate that was princely in extent, although only a small portion of it had been brought under cultivation, the greater part of it being used as a range for cattle, of which the proprietor possessed several thousand head.

Colonel Brooke was a Virginian of the old style, who had left his worn-out acres, and had emigrated to Texas, many years before the time of which we are writing. He had brought wealth with him, which he expected to increase without limit. He had been growing rich under the rule of the Mexicans, and he anticipated greater riches when Texas should gain her independence, for he only wanted a market for his beefes, and that would soon be made for him by the enterprising Americans, who would flock into the new country in numbers.

He had built for himself a comfortable, large, one-storied house of brick, with numerous outbuildings, the whole surrounded by a strong and thick adobe wall, with circular bastions at the corners. Here he had more than once held out against the attack of Indians from the north, and here he expected to defy the Mexicans, if they should venture to approach his stronghold without artillery.

On this extensive rancho he lived like a feudal lord, surrounded by his peons and rancheros, abundantly supplied with necessaries and with every luxury that could be procured, and happy in the companionship and affections of his wife and his two fine children, a son and a daughter.

This was the place that Robert Horton had selected for his temporary home in Texas; or, rather, it had been selected for him. His wife was distantly related to the wife of Colonel Brooke, who had prevailed upon the Hortons to remain with him until they could fix upon a permanent residence and arrange a home to their satisfaction.

Here they had been so hospitably entertained, and had been made to feel so entirely at home, that they were in no hurry to seek another location, preferring to wait until the state of the country should become more settled. Mrs. Horton, as well as her daughter, would have been very happy, if it had not been for the long absences of her husband, rendered necessary by the nature of his business. It was always with tearful eyes and many forebodings that she saw him set off on his journeys, and she continued uneasy and despondent until his return, fearing that he would lose his life in traveling through that wild and lawless country.

At last the sad and dreary day had come. The night before, Mr. Horton's horse had come home riderless, with specks of blood on the saddle. In the early morning a horseman had ridden to the house to inform them that the husband and father had been murdered and robbed, and that his murderer had been arrested and placed in confinement.

Mrs. Horton had gone into hysterics, and she continued in that condition during the day, mourning like Rachel, and refusing to be comforted. Colonel Brooke was absent at the temporary seat of government of the new republic, being a delegate to the general convention; but his son Walter made all necessary inquiries, and arranged to have the body brought home, and his wife and daughter assisted Mrs. Horton and comforted Helen to the best of their ability.

It was evening. Mr. Horton's body had been brought home, and was lying, in mournful state, in one of the best rooms of the house. Mrs. Horton had partially recovered from her hysterics, and required the presence of her daughter no longer. Walter Brooke, seeing how Helen was suffering amid such scenes, persuaded her to walk out for a while in the pleasant evening air, hoping that it would revive her spirits and restore her strength.

She was always ready to be persuaded by him, for an intimacy existed between them, which was fast ripening into affection. On this occasion she felt that his arm would be a strong one to lean upon, and that his words of comfort would be soothing to her ear. She was, therefore, willing and glad to walk with him.

When he had said many comforting words to her, assuring

her of the continued love of his father's family, with whom she might always find a home, the conversation turned on the person who was accused of her father's murder.

"He must be a monster," said Helen, "for my father was always so good and kind to all men, that none who ever knew him could possibly hate him."

"This man, on the contrary, is no monster," replied Walter. "He is a simple-natured, good-hearted old hunter. I have reason to know that he regarded your father as one of the best of men, and I have heard him say that he would be willing to die for him or for you."

"What induced him, then, to seek his life?"

"I do not believe that he did seek his life, or that he killed him. He tells quite a different story, as I understand. He says that he had warned Mr. Horton that there was danger in that pass; that he heard a shot, and felt convinced that your father had been fired at; that he hastened to the spot, and found the body lying in the road, where he had been murdered and robbed; and that he was about to go for assistance, when he was surrounded and arrested."

"That is a story that a guilty man might tell, as well as an innocent one."

"True enough, and appearances are strongly against old Bill Syee, but I can not believe that he is guilty."

"Do you know him well?"

"Better than he is known by any man in these parts, I think. He has not been here long, his life having been spent in the mountains and plains; but I have hunted and camped with him a great deal, and I have always known him to be just what I have told you, a simple-natured and honest hunter. I do not believe that he would tell a lie to save his life, and you can judge whether I would believe him capable of committing murder."

"Is he not a poor man?"

"Very poor, for he owns nothing in the world except his rifle; but he has no wants that his rifle can not supply, and consequently there was no temptation for him to commit robbery or murder."

"If he is not the murderer, I am afraid that the right man will never be found. Mother says that we will be ruined

unless the papers that were on father's person can be recovered."

"Indeed! Were they so valuable?"

"You know that he expected to purchase the hacienda of Los Sancillos, on the Brazos. He intended to invest all his money in it, and to bring home the title-deeds. If those papers are lost, we will have little or nothing left."

"If they can not be recovered, perhaps the Mexican from whom your father purchased will execute another deed. If he is an honest man, he will do so."

"Men are not likely to be more honest than the law compels them to be, especially in Texas."

"That is true, but your mother has trouble enough, without borrowing more, and we ought to hope for the best."

Although Walter Brooke found it so easy to induce Helen Horton to doubt the guilt of old Bill Syce, his arguments had little weight with her mother. Mrs. Horton's great grief for the loss of her husband subsided into a settled sorrow; but there was joined to this sorrow an unrelenting hatred of the murderer and a fierce desire for vengeance upon him.

She would listen to nothing that Walter Brooke could say in his favor, and was greatly offended with him for taking the side of a murderer. In her prejudiced opinion, the man who had been arrested for taking the life of Robert Horton, who had been found standing by the side of his dead body, was the man who did the deed, and she would listen to no arguments that tended to show his innocence. She was only anxious—revengefully anxious—that he should suffer the extreme penalty of the law, if there was law enough in Texas to hang him. If the law was powerless or unwilling or slow to avenge her, she wished the people to take the matter into their own hands, that the guilty might not go unpunished.

She so far conquered her repugnance toward the supposed criminal, after the burial of Mr. Horton, as to request Walter Brooke to take her to see him, hoping that she might induce him to disclose the hiding-place of the papers that had been taken from the person of the murdered man.

Walter gladly complied with her request, as he wished to hear from the lips of Bill Syce himself his account of what he knew about the murder.

The visit was productive of nothing but increased anxiety and exasperation to Mrs. Horton. They found the old man confined in one of the outbuildings attached to Barham's tavern. He was not ironed, and he might easily have escaped if he had been inclined to do so; but he was more gaunt and haggard than ever; his gray eyes were more sunken; and he had a pining, moping, melancholy look, as if he never expected to breathe again the free air of the forests and the plains.

Mrs. Horton spoke to him with great excitement and incoherence, demanding to know why he had killed a good man who had never harmed him, and denouncing the vengeance of heaven on him for the deed. She at first entreated him to give up her husband's papers, and thus save his family from ruin; and then threatened him with all manner of tortures unless he should tell where they might be found.

Tearful entreaties and direful threats were alike unavailing. The old man declared that he had not killed Mr. Horton; that nothing in the world could have induced him to do so; that he was as sorry for his death as any man could be; and that he was entirely ignorant concerning the papers or other valuables of which the land-agent had been robbed.

To Walter Brooke he told his simple story in his simple manner. It was substantially the same as the young gentleman had already heard, but the earnest and unaffected words of the old hunter carried conviction to his heart.

"I feel certain that Bill Syee is innocent of the murder of your father," said Walter to Helen, when she asked him the particulars of the visit. "There were tears in his eyes when your mother asked him to give up the papers, and when he spoke of Mr. Horton's death. I am so strongly convinced of his innocence, that I intend to defend him at his trial, though I fear that your mother will be much offended with me for doing so."

As Mrs. Horton continued to be greatly troubled concerning the title-deeds that were supposed to have been taken from her husband, Walter Brooke went to visit the Mexican from whom Mr. Horton had purchased his estate, hoping that the business might be arranged satisfactorily. The Mexican, however, had been informed of the murder and robbery, and he

denied that Mr. Horton had purchased the estate, or had paid him any money, or that any bargain had been made concerning the property. Having no proof, Walter was unable to press the matter, and returned without success.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRIAL.

OLD David Deems, or "Judge" Deems, as he was usually called, had been chosen as the alcalde, or justice of the peace, of the region in which Barham's tavern was situated, because he was a popular man, because he was believed to be honest, and because he possessed a knowledge of the Mexican language and customs, such as made him useful in settling some questions of title and the disputes that arose between the proprietors and their herdsmen and peons.

He was seldom called upon to exercise judicial authority, his duties being generally confined to notarial proceedings and petty arbitrations; but, when he did sit as "judge," he considered his power as unlimited and incapable of being questioned.

He was not an old man; but there were so few cases of longevity in Texas—where life was shortened by so many accidents and affrays, as well as by exposure and intemperance—that a man who had passed the age of fifty was considered old, and David Deems was consequently known as "Old Judge Deems."

A case of murder had never been brought before him, as the law was generally powerless to punish the outlaws and rustics who infested the land and boasted of their misdeeds. If the crimes of such were not avenged by private hands, they usually went unavenged.

The murder of Robert Horton, however, was quite a different affair. He was a person of such respectability and importance, and had made himself so popular, that many people took an interest in bringing his murderer to punishment.

Besides this, old Bill Syce was a poor and friendless hunter, with no powerful clan to back him, and he might be hanged as well as not, thus furnishing a cheap example to other offenders. It has been said that the worst use you can put a man to is to hang him; but there were those who thought that hanging was the best use that could be made of old Bill Syce, as his death might then be of some value, whatever his life had been.

Judge Deems held his court in Barham's tavern, and that rule hostelry was thronged on the occasion of the trial of old Bill Syce. Thither came hunters and half-breeds, Mexicans and mestizoes, rancheros and rough-riders, proprietors and peons, a motley mixture of good, bad and indifferent. The more respectable and the more impudent portion crowded into the building, while the peons, mestizoes and half-breeds generally congregated on the outside.

There was Judge Deems, broad, burly and important, seated at a rough table, with an antiquated law-book and a little paper before him. There was Bill Syce, sitting near the judge, so that the latter might have him "under his eye," looking dejected, woe-begone, and "guilty, of course." There were Mrs. Horton, weeping hysterically, and Helen, pale and tearful, supported by Colonel Brooke and his wife. There was the acting prosecuting attorney, a young man from San Felipe de Austin, who was looking ahead to political triumph when Texas should become an independent republic. There, too, was Walter Brooke, pale but determined, ready to defend the unfortunate prisoner, in spite of the frowns of his father, the disapproval of the "crowd," or--what he really dreaded--the enmity of the wife of the murdered man, the mother of the girl he loved.

Perhaps Walter might have demurred to the legality of the court, objecting that an alcalde had no right to try a man for murder; but law in Texas (what there was of it) was in a very unsettled condition at that time, and it is probable that Judge Deems' court was as legal as any other. At all events, he would have promptly overruled any objection to its legality, and would have been sustained by the "crowd."

In the same room in which the trial was held, big Pete Barham was rapidly dealing out liquor to all who desired it,

and they were many, for nearly all Texans drank when they could get liquor, and such an extraordinary occasion was sure to test their guzzling abilities to the utmost. It was probable that the judge would soon have plenty of cases to try, if he should pay attention to such "little matters" as shooting, stabbing, and gouging, "among friends."

Hardly had the alcalde selected a jury of twelve good and discreet men—for he considered that his special province and duty, with which he allowed no interference—when there was an unusual noise at the door of the tavern, which soon assumed the proportions of a disturbance, and a number of rough-looking men crowded into the room, pushing their way toward the table near which the prisoner was seated with the judge.

At the same time there arose cries, within and without the building, of "Hang him!" "Bring him out!" "Give him up to us!" "We will regulate him!" "Rope him out of there!" etc., plainly indicating that a mob had been formed for the purpose of taking the prisoner from the judge and executing summary vengeance upon him.

The leader of the mob—a man of intelligent but sinister appearance, whose dress showed a desire to imitate the exterior of a gentleman—forced his way to within a short distance of the prisoner, to whom he spoke, beckoning with one hand, and exhibiting a rope with the other.

"Come out here, Bill Syee," said he. "We want you. We mean to see that justice is done in this case, and we mean to attend to it right away. Come along, now, without making any fuss."

The old hunter did not seem to consider this summons extraordinary or improper. The man with the rope appeared to be the spokesman of the "crowd," and Bill Syee was accustomed to obey the voice of the "crowd" as law. He partly rose from his seat, therefore, with a submissive look, as if he was prepared to obey the mandate, to go forth and be hanged.

It was not so with David Deems. The alcalde saw in this attempt to override his court an armed invasion of his authority, which, if submitted to, would render the law powerless, and place him at the mercy of a mob. It was full time,

he thought, that the dignity of the law, as well as his own dignity, should be asserted and established, and he had looked upon the trial of old Bill Syce as the means by which that object was to be effected. He laid his hand upon the shoulder of the prisoner, forcing him back into his seat, and confronted the intruders with a boiling-over expression of mingled astonishment and indignation.

"Who in thunder are you?" he shouted, as soon as his anger could find vent.

"My name is Howard Brasse, if you want to know my handle," replied the man with the rope.

"I don't care a durn how hard your brass is," vociferated the alcalde. "It ain't a bit too hard for me to smash, and I know enough of your handle to handle you. Whar in creation did you come from, and what do you want here?"

"We are regulators," replied Brasse, "and we want to hang that man who killed Squire Horton, to make sure that justice is done."

"Hell's full of such regulators as you are. If justice was done to you, I reckon you would be regulated out of the world mighty sudden, for I make no doubt that you are a prison-bird from the States, one of those scamps who keep about the nine-mile peraira. Do you know that this is a court of justice, and that I am going to try that man for murder?"

"I know that you call it a court, but that don't make it so. We have been told that you mean to have a sham trial here, and then let the man go."

"I don't believe that any man in Texas was fool enough to tell you any thing of the sort."

"That's neither here nor there. We know what we have made up our minds to do, and we want the man. Come along, Bill Syce, or we will take you."

As the man with the rope was backed up with a number of rough and wild-looking men, who clamorously seconded his demand, exhibiting a formidable array of rifles, muskets and knives, Judge Deems thought it best to call forth his own forces, to set "crowd" against "crowd," and see which was the strongest.

He spoke to Colonel Brooke, and called upon all who were

in favor of law and order to step forward and aid him in expelling the intruders. He also put a weapon in the hands of Bill Syee, telling him on which side he should use it.

"You have a chance for your life here, Bill," said he; "if you are found guilty, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you will be hung according to law; but those fellows would take you out and string you up like a dog."

The result probably exceeded the expectations of the alcalde, for he looked around upon his "crowd" with an air of satisfaction and triumph. On his side were ranged Colonel Brooke and Walter, the men who acted as sheriff and prosecuting attorney, big Pete Barham and Bill Syee, the twelve jurymen, and all the respectable portion of the assembly, and all were well armed and determined. It was evident that the object of the self-styled regulators did not meet the approval of the majority, and they began to draw back.

"You haul in your horns, do you, Mr. Howard Brass?" triumphantly exclaimed the alcalde, still addressing the ring-leader. "If there was a jail in these parts stout enough to hold you, I would arrest the whole stack of you; but I'm sorry to say that we haven't got that far yet. You'd better clear out of here now, for I've a notion that you'll get the tallest kind of a whippin' if you undertake to interfere with this court again."

"You needn't think that you have scared us, old man," replied Brasse. "If you really mean to try Bill Syee as he ought to be tried, we are willing to let the trial go on; but we mean to stay here and see that justice is done."

Quiet having been restored, the trial proceeded, and was conducted according to Judge Deems' notions of law and justice. The testimony against Bill Syee was quite positive, although circumstantial, and bore mainly upon the points which have already been recorded, namely, the discovery of the body of Mr. Horton, with the accused standing over it, his declared knowledge of the dangerous character of the locality in which the murder occurred, and his statement to Barham, at the tavern, that he expected to have money before long. On the part of the prisoner no evidence was introduced, except to show his previous good character and peaceable disposition.

Walter Brooke, notwithstanding the cold looks of his father and the frowns of Mrs. Horton, pleaded for old Bill Syce as well as he could ; but he was manifestly embarrassed, and the sympathies of his audience were not with him ; consequently, his effort was not as effective as it might otherwise have been. In fact, the most pathetic portion of his appeal, in which he eloquently pictured the poor, lonely, and forsaken condition of the old man, was rather calculated to injure his cause than to advance it ; for, where could justice find an easier or more submissive victim than old Bill Syce ?

The young gentleman from San Felipe de Austin stated the case against the accused very forcibly. He made the most of the strong points of the evidence, and was particularly eloquent in describing the wild and lawless condition of the country, and urging the necessity of severe examples to strike terror into the desperadoes who were making the name of Texas a byword and a reproach among all civilized communities.

But the charge of Judge Deems was the most unique production, and at the same time the most calculated to tell against the prisoner. According to his doctrine, the fact that the old hunter was found by the body of the murdered man, must be taken as satisfactory proof of his guilt, unless the contrary could be proved. If old Bill Syce did not kill Robert Horton, said the alcalde, he must show who did kill him. He had not done so, and consequently he must be presumed to be guilty. The previous good character of the prisoner was no proof of innocence, nor could any presumption be raised in his favor by the circumstance that none of the property of the murdered man was found in his possession. In fact, it was evident from the charge that Judge Deems believed that justice demanded a victim, and that old Bill Syce was suitable for the sacrifice. It was also evident that he considered his jury merely as a convenient institution, for the purpose of giving formal expression to his own opinions.

The result is soon told. The tavern was cleared of all except the jury, Judge Deems, who chose to remain with them to instruct them, and the prisoner, whom he wished to keep under his own eye.

In a few moments the "crowd" was again called in, and the alcalde resumed his seat, and called upon the jury for their verdict.

"We find the accused guilty," said the foreman, as he rose "and sentence him—"

"Hold on thar!" exclaimed Judge Deems. "You are goin' a leetle bit too far. You have done all that you were called on to do, and the rest is my business. Bill Syee, have you anythin' to say, why you shouldn't be hanged for killin' Squire Horton? If you have, stand up and say it like a man."

"As fur the hangin', I reckon I can't say nothin' ag'inst it," meekly replied the hunter, slowly rising and addressing the alcalde and the "crowd." "I didn't kill Mr. Horton, and wouldn't hev done it fur the world; but thar's no use in my sayin' that, as you all hev settled it that I am guilty. I reckon I must be guilty, anyhow, and hev done enough to deserve hangin'. Thar ain't a creetur' in the world to keer fur me, and, if hangin' a man fur killin' Mr. Horton will make anybody feel better, I reckon I mought as well be strung up as anybody. I believe that's all I've got to say, judge."

"That's enough, Bill, and you said it very well. I must now sentence you—I dont want to hurt your feelings, but it is my duty—to be hung by the neck until you are dead; and I hereby app'nt—have you thought of any day, Bill, that would suit you for the hangin'? It seems to me that we might as well finish up the business now, as we are all here, and the sooner it's over with the better. But I don't want to hurry you unless you are willin', and perhaps you may have some matters to settle up."

"Thar's only one thing I want to settle," replied the old man, "and I must ask a little time on that. Fur some weeks I've been mortal bent to jine General Sam Houston, and do what I could to help him whip out the Greasers. My only boy was murdered by the bloody Mexicans at the Alamo, and I do want to settle that account afore I die. If you will let me go till the scrimmage is over, I wiil be sartin to come back then, if I am livin', and let you do with me as you please."

"I reckon I will have to do it," said the alcalde, with a sigh. "If the hangin' has to be put off, it might as well be put off a month or so as a day or so. I think the fightin'

ought to be finished up inside of sixty days, Bill, and I will give you just that much time. But you must be sartin to come back here at the end of sixty days, to be hanged."

"I'll do that very thing, judge, as sure as shootin', if the Greasers don't wipe me out."

"You must be here, gentlemen," continued the alcalde, addressing the jury, "on the sixty-first day, to witness the hangin', for that is the law, or it ought to be. This court is now adjourned."

Howard Brasse and his friends grumbled at this seeming leniency, but the alcalde and his party were too strong for them, and the assembly gradually dispersed, Judge Deems remaining at the tavern, for the purpose of protecting Syco against violence until he could be got out of the way.

CHAPTER IV.

A BAFFLED PLAN.

WALTER BROOKE soon discovered, after the trial of Bill Syce, that the course of true love was not to run smoothly with him and Helen Horton. The mother of that young lady had become his enemy, and was unable to forgive him for his defense of the old hunter. The secret dislike which she had exhibited toward Walter before the trial, was now changed to open opposition, and she did her best to discourage her daughter from seeing him or holding communication with him.

This state of feeling on the part of Mrs. Horton caused the young people the greatest discomfort and unhappiness. She carried her opposition so far as to assure Colonel Brooke that it would be useless for Walter to continue his attentions to Helen, as she could not marry him. Helen, she said, was now poor and dependent, and it would not be proper for her to think of an alliance with the son of a rich proprietor, especially with a man who had endeavored to save her father's murderer from the punishment due to his crime.

In vain Colonel Brooke remonstrated with her, told her that Walter could make Helen rich and independent, and declared that it would be doing a great wrong to separate two such loving hearts. The heart-sore widow was obdurate, and said that unless Walter ceased his attentions to her daughter, she must seek another home for herself and Helen.

On this subject Colonel Brooke and his son had a long and earnest conversation. Walter plainly told his father that his love for Helen was such that life would be valueless to him without her, and the colonel, who had never denied his son any thing, was ready and willing to aid him to the extent of his ability. It was agreed between them that the loss of her property, through the murder and robbery of Mr. Horton, was not the only or the chief reason that induced the widow to object to Walter as a suitor of her daughter, but that her animosity was mainly caused by his conduct in acting as the defender of old Bill Syce.

"How could I do otherwise, father?" earnestly asked Walter. "I believed that the old man was innocent, and I still believe it. There was absolutely nothing against him except the fact that he was found standing by the body of Mr. Horton a short time after the murder, and that might have happened to any one who first discovered the body. He was condemned because he was poor and friendless, and not because he was guilty. Believing him innocent, I should have ceased to respect myself if I had not made an effort to defend him."

"I don't blame you, my boy. It was bad policy, as you now see, but I suppose I would have done the same thing if I had been as young as you are, and if I had believed as you do."

"Do you believe, sir, that Bill Syce was guilty of the murder of Robert Horton?"

"It is useless to discuss that question now, Walter. He has been found guilty, and that must be considered as settling the matter. The proof against him was not very strong, I admit, but it is not worth while to disturb old sores."

"For my part, I believe him to be as innocent as I am, and I hope that the time will yet come when the real murderer will be discovered and the character of the old man will be

cleared, although he may have then suffered for another's crime."

It was decided by Colonel Brooke that Mrs. Horton's ostensible objection to the union of Helen with Walter must be overcome, as he considered that her real objection would be weakened by time, and she would finally be induced to give her consent to the desired marriage.

To accomplish this object, it was proposed to perpetrate upon her a harmless fraud, to restore her to a condition of competence and independence, and to persuade her that it was the work of her deceased husband.

Colonel Brooke, therefore, was to proceed at once to the Brazos, to visit the Mexican from whom Mr. Horton had intended to purchase the estate of Los Sancillos. He was to buy the rancho and to have the deed made out as Mr. Horton had intended it should be made when he went to the Brazos for the same purpose. He was then to inform Mrs. Horton that the Mexican, overcome by the prickings of his conscience, or by fear of the law, had confessed that Mr. Horton had bought the property and had paid him for it, and that he had felt himself bound to execute a deed similar to that which he had before given to Mr. Horton. The widow would thus be independent, if not wealthy, and could have no objection, on the score of property, to the marriage of Helen and Walter.

Colonel Brooke and his son had no doubt that Mr. Horton had consummated the purchase of the estate in question, and that the deed had been taken from him when he was murdered; for such was the intention with which he went to the Brazos, and he had taken money for the purpose. It was not to be supposed, however, that the deed would ever be recovered, and it was certain that the old Mexican, knowing his advantage, would deny that it had ever been executed, or that any money had been paid to him by Mr. Horton.

Accompanied by two trusty rancheros as a guard, the colonel set out, and in due time arrived safely at the Brazos, where he easily found the rancho of Los Sancillos, and called upon its proprietor.

Señor Pedro Garjo was a true Mexican, a lean, dried-up, yellow-skinned old man, lazy, and illiterate, and prejudiced,

hating the Americans, and destitute of ambition or desire for improvement. Wealthy as he was, he was content to live in the midst of uncleanness and discomfort, detesting the approach of the civilization of the Americans.

He received his visitor very coldly, and without the least pretense of hospitality. When Colonel Brooke made known his business, Señor Garjo immediately flew into a passion, declaring that he wished to hear no more of Mr. Horton or his pretended purchase of the rancho.

"You Yankees," said he, "are such infernal robbers and cheats, that you think all other people must be robbers and cheats. Your son has already been troubling me concerning this matter, and what I told him ought to have satisfied you. You seem to suppose that your friend purchased this estate from me and paid for it, and that I wish to cheat his family out of their dues. You insult me by the supposition, and I wish to hear no more about it."

"I am sure that I did not say or insinuate any thing of the kind," replied Colonel Brooke. "We know, however, that Mr. Horton desired to purchase this property, that such was his object when he came here, and that he took money with him for that purpose."

"He left none of his money here, I tell you. If he brought money, he took it away when he went, and I saw nothing of it. Are you so silly as to suppose that his assassin would have robbed him of a title-deed? He took your friend's money, if he had money, but he would not have robbed him of a paper that would be worthless to every one except the rightful owner."

"Your declaration upon that subject is sufficient for us, Señor Garjo. If Mr. Horton did not have the deed, it could not have been stolen from him."

"I wish, then, to hear no more insinuations about it. I tell you, as I told your son, that your friend did not purchase this estate from me, nor did he make any bargain for it. In fact, the price was much larger than he was willing to pay, and he went away disappointed because he could not get it for nothing."

As Mr. Horton had told Colonel Brooke that a contract had been concluded with Señor Garjo, that a certain price had

been agreed on, and that it was only necessary to pay the money and receive the deed, the colonel knew that the old Mexican was lying; but he forbore to press the point in the absence of evidence, and returned to the subject which had brought him to Los Sancillos.

"I was not saying any thing about Mr. Horton, or insinuating that you had given him a deed for this rancho. What you said upon that subject to my son is of course satisfactory to me. It was an entirely different business that brought me here. Mr. Horton had intended to purchase Los Sancillos for his wife, and she is anxious to own it. If it is still for sale, and you are willing to accept a reasonable price for it, I desire to buy it in her name."

The Mexican started, and turned yellower than ever, glancing suspiciously at Colonel Brooke, and twisting uneasily in his chair.

"You Yankees are so prying and inquisitive!" he exclaimed. "You want to have every thing and to know every thing. Valgame Dios! there is no telling what you do not know."

"I do not understand you, Señor Garjo."

"Indeed! have you not come here to make a fool of me? Do you not know that Los Sancillos is already sold?"

"I assure you that I had not even had such a suspicion."

"It is true, nevertheless, and you are too late, Señor Colonel, if you really wished to purchase the estate."

"To whom have you sold it?"

"There you are again! What devils of inquisitive people these Yankees are! The purchaser of Los Sancillos is a rich American gentleman, named Señor Brasse. You know him, I suppose, as he comes from your part of the country."

Colonel Brooke was obliged to confess his ignorance of the existence of Señor Brasse, although the name somehow sounded familiar to him.

"He is now riding out to look at his property, as the contract has been concluded," said the old Mexican. "He will probably return before long, and then you will have the pleasure of making his acquaintance, as I suppose you must stay with me until morning."

Colonel Brooke accepted this very ungracious invitation, more because he wished to behold "Señor Brasse," than

because it was necessary for him to remain as a guest of the Mexican.

Before night the "rich American gentleman" made his appearance, and Señor Garjo left the two strangers to entertain each other.

As soon as the colonel saw "Señor Brasse," he knew why the name sounded familiar to him, and recollects where he had seen him before. It was at the trial of old Bill Syce, where the "rich American gentleman" had appeared at the head of a gang of roughs, in the character of a regulator, insisting upon the immediate execution of the old hunter.

It seemed strange that this fellow, who was not known to any respectable people in that portion of Texas, should so suddenly appear in the character of a capitalist, rich enough to purchase such an estate as Los Sancillos. Stranger things had happened, however, in that wild and semi-barbarous country, and Colonel Brooke forbore comment on the transformation, especially as Mr. Howard Brasse was well dressed, having the appearance of a gentleman, if not exactly the manners of one.

He was sufficiently communicative on the subject of his purchase, saying that he had just bought the estate from Señor Garjo, that he had been looking at the land, and that he was well pleased with his bargain. When Colonel Brooke spoke of his desire to purchase the rancho, saying that he had come for that purpose, and that he had been much disappointed in discovering that it had already found a purchaser, Mr. Howard Brasse intimated it as a possibility that he might be induced to sell, as he had bought the land on speculation, and had no special desire to keep it. He added that he was going in the same direction with Colonel Brooke, and, if the latter had no objection, he would bear him company on his journey, when they might talk over the matter more at their leisure.

The next morning the colonel set out toward his home, accompanied by his new acquaintance, but they did not make much progress in bargaining, as Brasse said that he had a friend with whom he must consult before giving a definite answer. He proved to be rather an inquisitive individual, and learned many particulars concerning Colonel Brooke and

his family ; whereas the colonel, being a gentleman by nature, did not endeavor to extract information from his companion concerning himself.

When Colonel Brooke reached his home, he invited Brasse to visit him, for the purpose of continuing the negotiation, and that individual not only accepted the invitation, but remained a guest at the colonel's house during several days, and he was heartily wished away before he took his leave.

Contrary to the expectations of his entertainer, no progress was made, during this time, in effecting a bargain for the rancho of Los Saneillos. On the other hand, he took an early opportunity of informing Mrs. Horton that he had become the owner of that estate, thus defeating the colonel's plan. He told her that he had invested the greater part of his ready means in the purchase, and that he expected to hold the property, in the belief that it would, at no distant day, become so valuable as to make him a very rich man.

He next appeared, greatly to the surprise and indignation of Walter Brooke and his father, in the character of a suitor for the hand of Helen Horton. Their displeasure was increased when they perceived that his pretensions were upheld by Mrs. Horton, with whom the fair-seeming and plausible Mr. Howard Brasse soon became quite a favorite. She told Mrs. Brooke that she was much pleased with this suitor, and that she would be glad for Helen to marry him, as he was the owner of the very estate which her father had intended to settle upon her.

When Brasse finally left Colonel Brooke's house, that gentleman gave him plainly to understand that he was by no means pleased with his proceedings, either in regard to the property on the Brazos, or in regard to Helen Horton. Brasse, however, was not at all rebuffed, and continued his visits, under the patronage of Mrs. Horton, whom the Brookes did not wish to oppose.

Helen detested him, and Walter declared that he could hardly keep his hands off him ; but he was restrained by his father, as well as by the duties of hospitality and by a feeling of respect for Mrs. Horton.

Naturally enough, the young gentleman began to wonder and to inquire. He wanted to know who this Howard Brasse

was, where he came from, and how he had happened to purchase the estate of Los Sancillos at that time.

The train of thought into which he was led gradually bred in him a suspicion, which finally shaped itself thus:—Was it not possible that Señor Garjo, after having sold his rancho to Mr. Horton, and having received the money for it, should himself have planned the murder of that gentleman, for the purpose of retaining the money and the property also? Such an assassination would have been in keeping with the character of the treacherous and cowardly Mexican. In order to carry out such a plan, he must have had a confederate to do the work, and Howard Brasse seemed to Walter a likely man to have been chosen for such a confederate. The old Mexican had probably given him, as a consideration for the deed, a sum of money, or a portion of his land, and had pretended to sell the rancho to him, to cover up his own iniquity.

This theory would account for Señor Garjo's very early information of the death of Mr. Horton. It would also account for the connection of Brasse with the old Mexican, for his sudden transformation from a seedy adventurer into a landed proprietor, and for several other circumstances which were otherwise mysterious.

Walter's thoughts settled down to the belief that Brasse was the real murderer of Mr. Horton, and he was sorry that old Bill Syce had happened to discover the body, thus putting justice on a false trail. He mentioned his suspicions to his father, but Colonel Brooke was unable to see the force of his arguments, and Walter resolved to use his best endeavors to unmask Mr. Howard Brasse and to bring the truth to light.

CHAPTER V.

FINDING AND STEALING.

IT was night, after the battle of San Jacinto, by which Texas gloriously avenged her wrongs, threw off the Mexican yoke, and achieved her independence.

The Mexican army, overwhelming in point of numbers, and led by Santa Anna in person, had been encountered and signally defeated by a small body of Texans and American volunteers, under the command of General Houston.

Impatiently the Texans had waited, burning to punish their vindictive foes, and to avenge the massacres of Goliad and the Alamo. They had waited until the Mexicans came fairly within their reach—until they could see the whites of their eyes and count the buttons on the gaudy uniforms of their officers ; and then, like starved tigers, leaping upon their prey, they had rushed forward with ferocious yells, broken the lines of their enemies, and won a decisive victory by a blow.

The combat had been brief, but bloody and fatal. Remember the Alamo !—Remember Goliad !—Remember Fannin and Travis !—were the war-cries of the vengeful Texans, many of whom had lost relations or friends in those cowardly and cruel massacres, the memory of which was fresh and hot in the hearts of all.

Little mercy was shown, little quarter given ; for Goliad and the Alamo were remembered, not only in the deadly rush that decided the battle, but in the headlong and bloody pursuit that followed the rout of the army of invasion. In vain did the unfortunate Mexicans, when begging for quarter in broken English, cry “ Me no Alamo ” ; they were remorselessly slaughtered, and the ground was covered with their dead. The pursuit was kept up until darkness put an end to it, and until the Mexican army was absolutely extinguished ; Santa Anna, ignominiously hiding in a swamp, was dragged forth, and carried, a trembling captive, to General Houston ; the war was ended, and Texas was free !

Walter Brooke, who was second in command of a company of Texans, had bravely acted his part on that glorious and bloody day. He had been in the thickest of the fight, and had carried off his full share of honors, without having stained his scutcheon by unnecessary cruelty or by refusing quarter to fallen foes. But he had had no relative or dear friend murdered with Fannin or Travis.

Old Bill Syce had accomplished the last desire of his life. He had "j'ined Sam Houston, to whip out the Greasers," and the work had been done to his entire satisfaction. He had been irregularly connected with Walter Brooke's company, as a sort of supernumerary, but had not been governed by its officers or controlled by its discipline. Through the combat and the subsequent pursuit, the old man seemed to be everywhere, fighting with wonderful energy and vigor, and dealing death among the dismayed Mexicans on all sides. Above all the din of the battle his Alamo war-cry could be heard, and wherever a knot of Mexicans gathered together, his tall and gaunt form was sure to be seen, dashing in among them and scattering them in confusion. He seemed to seek death, but did not find it; the destroying angel was with him, and he was fated to give what he wished to receive.

It was night, after the battle. Watchfires were lighted over the plain, and the army of independence was sleeping in its bivouac, resting from the bloody labors of the day. The pursuit was ended, but prowlers were scattered about among the slain, some for purposes of plunder, and others searching for the bodies of friends.

Among the latter was Walter Brooke; for his captain had fallen in the first onset, and he considered it a sacred duty to recover his body and give it proper burial.

As he was searching with a lantern, he saw a man, at a little distance from him, rise up from stooping among the bodies. Almost at the same instant a shot was fired, and the man started and ran away at full speed.

"Missed him, by thunder!" exclaimed a hoarse voice, as Walter looked around to see where the shot had come from.

A tall and gaunt form emerged from a little ravine, and slowly approached the young gentleman. Notwithstanding the bloodstained face and tattered garments of this apparition,

Walter easily recognized the haggard features of his friend, Bill Syce. The old man was more lean and gaunt than ever; his eyes were more deeply sunken in his head, and his expression was fearfully wild and wandering. He had no hat to cover his matted hair, and his hands, as well as his face, bore evidence of the bloody work that he had done that day.

He stopped, and commenced to reload his rifle, waiting for Walter to come to him.

"Did you fire that shot, Bill?" asked the young officer. "What do you mean by shooting at people about here?"

"I did, Walter, though I am ashamed to own it," replied the old hunter. "If I had been shootin' to kill him I wouldn't have missed that a-way; but I only wanted to lame him, so that he couldn't git off afore I could ketch him."

"Who was he, Bill? Why did you shoot at him?"

"I have been huntin' fur him ever sence dark, Walter. He wasn't in the fight—I'm tol'able sartin of that—but he has been hangin' around all the time, arter it was over. I knowed thar was suthin' wrong about him when I first set eyes onto him, and I hope I 'ven nail him yet. I know I ken, if you will help me."

"But who is he? What do you want of him? I am afraid you are going crazy, old man."

"Not quite yet, Walter. Do you see this here article?" asked the hunter, taking a fine Derringer pistol from his breast.

"Yes, I see it. Where did you get it?"

"Look at it well, Walter. Hold it up to your light, and look at it close."

The young officer examined the pistol by the light of his lantern, and started back in astonishment, for he recognized it as having been the property of Mr. Horton, and it bore his initials, "W. H."

"This was Mr. Horton's pistol," he exclaimed. "How did you come by it?"

"He dropped it, Walter. I saw him on the ground jest arter dark. I was lookin' over the field here, kinder countin' up the work we had done to-day, and I noticed him stoopin' about among the bodies, as if he was stealin' or huntin' fur

suthin'. He started and walked away when he saw me comin', and then he dropped this pistol without noticin' it. I picked it up, and was goin' arter him to give it to him, when I saw what it was. I knowed the weepon right well, Walter, because it's a mighty fine thing, and Mr. Horton and I tried those pistols when he got 'em. He shot with one, and I shot with t'other, and he beat me at pistol shootin'. While I was lookin' at it the feller slipped away, and got out of sight. I'd been lookin' fur him ever sence, ontil I saw him here ag'in, and then I shot at him to stop him; but luck was ag'inst me, and I missed him."

"Who was he, Bill? I have asked you several times, but you have not told me."

"Do you remember that man, Walter, with store clothes on—though it was a powerful old suit—who come up when Judge Deems was tryin' his law onto me, and wanted to take me out and hang me? He had a rope in his hand, and talked mighty sassy at fust, but he backed down tol'able soon."

"Howard Brasse?"

"That's what he called himself, I believe."

"Are you sure that he dropped this pistol?"

"Sartin as a dead sight on a level, across a log. I saw it fall out of his clothes. He must hav been skeered, or he would hav noticed it."

"This was one of Mr. Horton's pistols, Bill, and he must have had it with him when he was killed, for he always carried both his Derringers when he went on a journey."

"I saw him with both in his belt at Pete Barham's tavern."

"It is likely that the man who dropped this one still has the other."

"Jest what I was thinkin'. That's why I wanted to ketch him and s'arch him."

"I wish I could prove that this was found on him."

"I ken sw'ar that he dropped it, Walter."

"You forget, old man, that you have been found guilty and sentenced. They would not receive your evidence now. You had better let me take the pistol, and I can say that it was found on the battle-field. If you should show it, people would not credit your story. They would be more likely to believe that you had taken it from Mr. Horton."

"That's a fact, but they can't believe any wuss than they do now, I reckon, and they can't hurt me any more than they mean to. I will keep the pistol, and folks may think what they please. I'praps I may come across that chap ag'in. I mean to hunt fur him, sartin."

Walter then told the old man how Brasse had suddenly become the proprietor of the rancho which Mr. Horton had intended to purchase, together with the subsequent proceedings of that individual, and explained his own suspicions concerning the murder of Mr. Horton. Bill Syce agreed with him, and it was determined that they would search for Brasse, for the purpose of learning who and what he was. They resolved to make no charge against him, but to watch him closely, hoping to discover some circumstances that might implicate him as the perpetrator of the crime for which the old hunter had been sentenced. They carefully looked for him, over the battle-field and among the camps, but he was not seen again in that locality.

In a few days after the battle, as there was no more fighting to be done, Walter Brooke returned to his father's house, which he found in a condition of great excitement and commotion, for Helen Horton was missing, having been carried off by Howard Brasse, as was supposed, the day before.

The young gentleman learned, on inquiry, that Brasse had called at the house to request Helen to ride with him. She had been very unwilling to do so, and had refused, until her mother positively ordered her to comply with the request of Brasse. They had gone off together, in the afternoon, and since that time neither of them had been seen or heard of.

All the members of the family were greatly excited and indignant, with the exception of Mrs. Horton, who bore the loss of her daughter so coolly and unconcernedly as to give rise to the suspicion that she had connived at the escapade.

When Walter Brooke spoke to her on the subject, she said that she had no doubt that Mr. Brasse had acted with right intentions, and that Helen would become, as her father had intended, the mistress of Los Sancillos.

Walter so far forgot himself as to lose his temper, accusing Brasse of having killed Mr. Horton, and charging her with aiding the murderer of her husband to steal her daughter;

but she treated his suspicions and arguments with contempt, assuring him that they were the offspring of a jealous mind and a perverted heart.

The young gentleman told his father of the finding of one of Mr. Horton's pistols, as corroborative of his belief of the guilt of Brasse, but Colonel Brooke was inclined to believe that Bill Syce had taken the pistol from Mr. Horton, and was only endeavoring to escape the consequences of his crime.

Thus disappointed and discouraged, Walter resolved to seek for Helen, and to recover her, in spite of her mother. This was against the advice of his father, who declared that he would have nothing more to do with the matter, and that only his exalted ideas of hospitality, and his respect for the memory of Mr. Horton, could induce him any longer to tolerate the presence of the widow under his roof.

CHAPTER VI.

A KNIGHT ERRANT.

BEAUTIFUL Bettie Brooke! If she has not hitherto been mentioned in this narrative, it is not because she did not deserve to be. She was the delight of her mother, the pride of her father, the admiration of her brother, and the adoration of many. But her adorers were obliged to worship at a distance, for she was regarded as a jewel of too great price to be set in any but the richest crown, and her parents had not yet seen any person whom they thought worthy of her. She had reached a marriageable age, too, having turned the corner of sixteen, and her bright eyes had already attracted many young men to that portion of Texas; but the right man to win her, in the estimation of Colonel Brooke and his wife, had not yet made his appearance.

Poor Bettie Brooke! She was beautiful enough to be the heroine of a romance, and she had a romance of her own, which was very real and entrancing to her. It seemed a pity that she should have fixed her affections upon one of her

father's rancheros, after so many suitors, of greater pretensions, had been rejected for her by her fastidious parents.

Juan Salas, however, was no ordinary herdsman, and was many degrees above the rank of a laborer. Young as he was, being as yet not twenty-three years of age, he was intrusted with the greater portion of Colonel Brooke's immense herds of cattle, that roamed at will over the unsenced prairies of his vast estate, and the pay that he received for his services was in proportion to the trust that devolved upon him and the skill and sagacity that were required of him.

He boasted, also, and with truth, that he was no mongrel Mexican, but that the blood of old Castile ran in his veins, pure, and unmixed with that of any of the aboriginal races of America. Like other Spaniards, he despised the Mexicans; he chose his associates among the Americans, as the people of the United States were called in that region, and sided with the Texans during their struggle with Mexico.

There was no better horseman in all Texas than Juan. In fact, his horsemanship was proverbial among rancheros and vaqueros far and near. There was no bolder or more skillful bull-fighter this side of Old Spain, and none could excel him in the use of the lasso, upon which accomplishment he especially prided himself. Added to this, he was very handsome, with a form like that of an Apollo, beautiful black hair, rich olive complexion, and large dark eyes, that were enough of themselves to captivate such a girl as Bettie Brooke.

It was no wonder that Bettie fell in love with the handsome young ranchero, although it was doubtless wrong for her to do so, as she must have known that such a proceeding would not be approved of by her parents. As they had turned away rich admirers, it was not to be supposed that they would consent to receive as a son-in-law one who had neither lands nor money. But Bettie loved Juan, and Juan loved Bettie, and the reason was, as is the case with many young lovers, that they could not help it.

It must be known that Bettie kept her love a secret from her parents. She could not hope that it would ever receive their sanction, and she saw no bright future before her; but she had fully determined, with all the strength of her young heart, that she would marry no one but Juan. Helen Horton

was her only confidant, but she did not tell her the extent of her love, although fully assured of her sympathy and secrecy, for Helen, too, had her love troubles.

Of the romances and poems that Bettie had read, Juan was always the hero, and her only hope was that he, like other heroes, might so distinguish himself, in some extraordinary and unlooked-for manner, that her father would be glad to give her to him. She was continually picturing to herself her lover, mounted upon a gallant steed, going forth to do some deed of high emprise, winning honor and rich reward by his noble and heroic exploits, and returning home in triumph, to lay his trophies at her feet, and to demand her hand of her admiring parents.

The action of Howard Brasse, in taking forcible possession, as it was supposed he had done, of Helen Horton, seemed to Bettie to present an opportunity for at least one such exploit, and she determined to urge her lover to hasten to the rescue of the captive maiden. This would be sure to win Walter to her side, and that young gentleman, as she well knew, had great influence with his father.

Besides, Bettie assented to her brother's opinion of the innocence of old Bill Syee, and was inclined to believe, with him, that it was more likely that Howard Brasse was the murderer of Mr. Horton, that he had been hired by Señor Garjo to do the deed, and that he had received his pay. If Juan Salas could prove this—if he could track Brasse to his unknown haunts, could rescue Helen from his clutches, could discover his true character, and could bring his crime to light—he would be doing a great deed, one that would be highly applauded and ought to be well rewarded.

There was danger in such an undertaking, of course; but Bettie believed that her hero, like all other heroes, could overcome all obstacles and defy all dangers. She was not afraid, therefore, to send him forth to encounter any perils that he might meet in Texas.

When she mentioned the subject to Juan, she found him at once eager for the enterprise, and he needed no urging or incitement to action. If he could please the lady of his love, and be of service to so many people, there was no undertaking too arduous or dangerous for him.

He set out accordingly, mounted on a fleet mustang, with his rifle slung at his side, his knife in his belt, and his inseparable lasso hanging in a coil from his saddle-bow, followed by the tears and prayers of Bettie Brooke.

There was, probably, no one better calculated for such an enterprise than Juan Salas; for his roving life in the saddle had not only made him well acquainted with the country, but had introduced him to many of the wild and desperate characters with which it abounded. With some of these, who had figured as cattle-stealers, his relations had not been of the most peaceful character; but all had a great respect for the person and prowess of the young ranchero, whose bravery and skill in the use of all weapons were well known among them.

In accordance with the suggestion of Judge Deems, Juan supposed that the principal haunt of Howard Brasse would probably be found somewhere in the vicinity of the nine-mile prairie, for that locality was noted as a rendezvous for cattle-thieves and other offenders. As Brasse was not known to have any local habitation, but had given out that he was a roving speculator, Juan conjectured that his pursuits were not of the most reputable character.

He resolved, therefore, to visit the region about the nine-mile prairie and examine it for himself, at the same time putting himself in communication with some of its inhabitants, especially with Tonto, a half-breed Apache, who had been his ally on more than one occasion.

At the western end of the long prairie there was a thick forest, where the land became broken up into ravines and watercourses, terminating in a series of rocky hills. Among these were many secret fastnesses, secluded and difficult of access, where criminals could find a secure retreat from private or public vengeance, for the officers of the law would not attempt to follow them into those strongholds, even if the law had had officers in Texas to execute its mandates.

It was about sunset when Juan entered the forest, and reached the first arroyo, where he concluded to pass the night, preferring the light of day for penetrating the recesses of the hills.

Noticing a place on the bank of the arroyo where a fire

had recently been built, he concluded to make his camp at the same spot. He dismounted, therefore, tied his horse to a swinging limb, and commenced to gather some sticks with which to make a fire.

As he was thus engaged, he saw something shining in the grass, and picked it up. It was a small gold locket, which he recognized as the property of Helen Horton, for it contained a portrait of her father, painted on ivory.

Juan was now satisfied that he was on the right track, and that he had only to wait until morning, when he could find Tonto, from whom he might ascertain the direction which Brasse had taken with his captive, or, at least, could learn where he would be likely to be found.

Having taken care of the locket, he built a little fire, ate his supper, rolled up a cigarrito, and sat down by his fire, to have a smoke, preparatory to lying down to sleep.

Hardly had he lighted his cigarrito, when several rough-looking men burst out from the thicket behind him, who pounced upon him, and bound him before he was able to offer any resistance.

Their leader was a short and stout, dirty and ragged man, with red hair and an ugly physiognomy.

"What do you mean by this, Jack Gurtch?" asked Juan, addressing himself to this individual. "What have I done to you, that you jump on me in this fashion?"

"It ain't so much fur what you've done as fur what you want to do," replied his captor. "You've missed some cattle lately, have you?—jest as if old Colonel Brooke couldn't spare a few out of his big ganado fur poor folks. You thought you would come and look us up, did you?—nosin' around arter bones and hides, so that you mought make up a party and come and wipe us out."

Juan denied that he was looking after stolen cattle, or that he was seeking to molest Gurtch or any of his friends. On the contrary, he said that his business was peaceable and of quite a different nature.

"It won't do, my lad," said Gurtch. "We have been bothered enough by you and your folks, and now we mean to put you where you won't have any more cattle to look arter. Bring him along, boys."

The ranchero was hurried across the arroyo, through the broken and wooded wilderness, until he reached a deep ravine in the midst of the hills, where he was thrust into a rough little log cabin, and one of his captors was placed as a guard over him.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE TRIAL.

THE first reflection Juan Salas, on finding himself shut up in the solitary cabin, was, that some of his old enemies had been taking a mean advantage of him, and that they were not likely to show him any mercy. The second was, that he had been in worse predicaments in the course of his life, and it was not impossible that he might escape from this.

He was not lacking in friends, even among the outlaws and desperadoes of that locality, and he was inclined to hope that some of them might interpose to save his life, if Jack Gurtch should try to push his vengeance to an extremity.

It was not long before he discovered that he had not hoped without cause.

A little after midnight, when he had forgotten his troubles in slumber, the cabin was entered by a young man with a light, who awakened the sleeper by shaking him rather roughly.

"Is this really you, Ben Syee, or is it your ghost?" exclaimed the ranchero, rising and staring in astonishment at the intruder.

"It is nobody but myself, my boy. Do I look like a ghost?"

"No; but we all thought you were murdered by the Mexican at the Alamo."

"But I wasn't, for the good reason that I didn't happen to be in the fort when it was captured."

"Where were you?"

"I had been sent off with some dispatches, and when I came back it was impossible to get into the Alamo. I was not very sorry, as I was in a much safer place outside."

"I am right glad to see you, Ben, for I am in need of a friend just now, and I am sure that I can rely upon an old comrade for help. You have not forgotten the time when we slept and fought together at Bexar?"

"Not a bit of it. I heard that you had been taken, and I knew that it would go hard with you if Jack Gurtch should have his way; so I came to see you."

"Are you going to let me stay in here, Ben, until that cut-throat decides what he will do with me?"

"Of course not. I am not going to allow an old friend to be ill treated while I can help it."

"Let me out, then, and show me how to get clear of this place."

"Don't be in such a hurry. There is plenty of time. I want to have a talk with you. Did you all think that I was killed at the Alamo?"

"Certainly; and I am not sure that I ought to be glad that you were saved, except for my own sake. How do you happen to be here? It is the worst place and the worst crowd in Texas, that you are in now."

"I know it, Juan. They are too rough for me, though I am no better than I ought to be. The fact is, I got into a scrape that made me want to keep away from the settlements for a while, and matters have turned out so, that I reckon I am better fitted for bad company than good."

"Your old father was nearly crazy when he heard that you were lost at the Alamo, and it would kill him if he knew you were here."

"It would be well if something could kill him before the rope gets around his neck. He must have been completely crazy when he shot Mr. Horton."

"Do you believe he killed him, Ben?"

"Why shouldn't I? I know that he was tried for it, and convicted, and sentenced to be hung, and I am told it was a clear case. The fact is, Juan, that that thing drove me into the company of Jack Gurtch. If the old man had taken to murdering people, I thought, and if he had to be hung for it, there was no use in my trying to be honest and respectable, even in Texas."

"You are wrong about that, Ben. For my part, I don't

believe that the old man killed Mr. Horton, and I am not the only one who thinks so. Walter Brooke, among others, says he has no doubt that Bill Syee is as innocent as he is."

"Why do they want to hang him, then?"

"Because, as Walter says, circumstances were rather against him, and they wanted to hang somebody, as they had never had a hanging in this section, and he seemed to be about the easiest subject that could be found."

"I wonder if this can be true? I wish I could be sure that it is. It would make a new man of me. I would give my life, a dozen times, to prove that the old man had not done that thing."

"That is just what I want to prove, and it is part of the business that brought me here. What pistol is that in your belt, Ben? Let me see it."

"It is one that Jack Gurtch lent me, and it is the finest Derringer I ever saw," replied Ben Syee, as he handed the pistol to his friend."

"I think so," said Juan, carefully examining the weapon. "Do you know where it came from?"

"No."

"I can tell you. It is one of the pistols that Mr. Horton had when he was shot, and it was taken from his body by the murderer."

"Is that so, Juan? How in creation did it come here? Do you suspect Jack Gurtch of having had any thing to do with the murder?"

"No, Walter Brooke's suspicions run in another way. Do you know any thing of a man named Howard Brasse?"

"Perhaps so. What sort of a fellow is he?"

"A rather good-looking man, with a wicked eye. He tries to dress in style, and has a very smooth and oily way of speaking."

"That's our Captain Howard, Juan. He and Jack Gurtch are the leaders of this gang; but he is the head devil of them all, and he orders Jack about as he pleases. He has been away for some time, but he came back, night before last, with a woman, and has gone off with her."

"It was Helen Horton. Do you know where he went to?"

"No; but I know where he started from."

"That will be sufficient, I suppose, if you will help me hunt for him, and if I can get Tonto to go along and trail for us."

"Is it a half-breed that you are speaking of?"

"Yes. He stays somewhere in these woods."

"I can take you to a place where you will be sure to find him."

The ranchero then gave Ben Syce an account of the movements of Howard Brasse, as far as he knew them, detailing the suspicions of Walter Brooke concerning the complicity of that individual in the killing of Mr. Horton, with the reasons for his suspicions, including the finding of the pistol on the battle-field of San Jacinto.

The son of the old hunter could hardly contain himself for joy at learning these developments. He had been so strongly assured of his father's guilt, that he had lost all hope, and had willingly given himself up to evil ways, in despair of being able to outlive his disgrace.

The intelligence that Juan Salas brought him, as he said, put new life in him, and completely changed his temper and his resolutions. He entered fully and ardently into the plans of the ranchero, hoping that he might be able to clear his father's character, if he could not save him from the death to which he was doomed.

He released Juan from the cabin in which he was confined, and returned his horse to him, taking without scruple, for himself, one of those that were kept by the outlaws.

Guided by Ben Syce, the ranchero then proceeded to a skin lodge, in the heart of the wilderness, where they were greeted by the barking of many dogs. The occupant of the lodge, aroused by his faithful sentinels, came forth, recognized them, and invited them to enter.

He was a slightly-built man, with the dark skin, straight black hair, and small eyes peculiar to the half-breeds.

"I want you, Tonto," said Juan, in reply to a question from the half-breed.

"I am ready. What do you want?"

"I want you to follow a trail."

"Show it to me."

The ranchero related the disappearance of Helen Horton

with Howard Brasse, who had probably taken her across the prairie. Ben Syce, he said, could point out the place from which they had started, and he had no doubt that Tonto could easily track them.

The half-breed recognized Brasse by the description that Juan gave, but had not lately seen him.

"Wait until morning," he said. "When it is light we will go on the trail."

He set some refreshments before his guests, after partaking of which, they lighted their pipes, and conversed on various subjects, principally on the killing of Robert Horton and the circumstances incident and subsequent thereto.

As soon as dawn began to break, the half-breed rolled up his lodge, and concealed it, together with the few articles that it contained, and brought forth a horse from some secret covert.

Young Ben Syce guided his two friends to the ravine through which Howard Brasse had passed with his captive. At the end of the ravine they plainly saw the tracks of three horses, tending toward the south-west. The trail was rather old, but Tonto said that he would have no difficulty in following it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WRONG TRAIL.

It must not be supposed that Walter Brooke remained idle after the disappearance of Helen. He had resolved to recover her, to take her out of the power of Howard Brasse, in spite of the indifference or opposition of her mother; but he met with many hindrances at the outset of his undertaking. The chief hindrance was from his father, who not only tried to dissuade him from attempting to search for the young lady, but found so much occupation for him at home, that he was unable to commence his pursuit until, in hunters' language, the trail had become cold.

When there was an end of all delays, and he at last found

himself in the saddle, it was with many doubts and forebodings that he set out on his mission; for there was no one to encourage him, much valuable time had been lost, Texas was a large and open country, with few settlements, and the rascal might easily have taken his prey far beyond the possibility of pursuit.

The young gentleman was determined, however, not to give up the search without effecting something. If he could not rescue Helen, he might, at least, he thought, find Howard, Brasse, and administer to him such a punishment as he deserved.

The evening of the second day after he set out, found him returning homeward, slowly and moodily; for his horse was wearied, and his search had been fruitless. Not only had he been unable to find Helen or Brasse, but he had gained no tidings of the whereabouts of the latter, and had not even learned where he would be likely to be found. As far as Walter's inquiries extended, Brasse seemed to have no associates among the people of that thinly-settled region. A few had seen him, but not lately, and none pretended to know any thing of his habits or his haunts.

Walter wished, again and again, that old Bill Syce was with him, to assist him in his search; for the old hunter was well acquainted with every portion of the country, and his peculiar sagacity would have rendered him invaluable on such an occasion. But Walter had seen nothing of the condemned man since he left him after the battle of San Jacinto, and could only hope that he, also, was working to the same end as himself, and that his efforts might meet with success.

Under the circumstances he could do nothing but go home, to give rest to his horse and himself and take another start. It was his intention, when he should again set forth, to explore the region about the nine-mile prairie, although he was little acquainted with it, and although it was known to be a perilous place for honest travelers.

It was no wonder that the young gentleman felt vexed and angry, as well as sad and dispirited; for every thing and everybody seemed to be against him, unless it might be Helen Horton, and he was even beginning to have his doubts about her. He felt that it was unjust and ungenerous to doubt her,

but his mind was full of doubt and suspicion, and he could not help it. In such an unpleasant mood, he desired to find some proper object upon whom he could visit his vengeance, and wished, above all things, that he might meet Howard Brasse, upon whose devoted head he was ready to empty the full vials of his wrath.

His wish was soon gratified. As he was entering the very pass where Robert Horton had met his death, he saw a horseman approaching him from the opposite side of the ravine. At the first glance he thought it was Howard Brasse. A second look confirmed this suspicion, and there was a cruel and vengeful light in his eyes as he loosened his pistols in his belt.

The individual who was approaching him seemed desirous of avoiding him; for he partly halted, and looked to one side and the other of the road, as if seeking for a place to turn off. This, however, might have been a fancy of Walter's excited imagination, as, when he spurred his horse, Brasse boldly rode forward to meet him.

"I have found you at last!" exclaimed Walter, reining his horse across the road, so as to stop the passage.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Brooke," replied Brasse, with an oily smile.

"Glad to see me! Perhaps so. You will not be so glad when I am through with you."

"What do you mean? I have been anxious to see you, and am happy to meet you."

"I have been looking for you during several days, and this is the proper place to find you—here, where you killed Mr. Horton."

"Have you gone crazy, Mr. Brooke?"

"No, I have not gone crazy; but I have found you out, you villain! I have discovered that you were the murderer of Mr. Horton, instead of poor old Bill Syce; that you were hired to do that deed by old Señor Garjo, the man from whom Mr. Horton bought the rancho of Los Sancillos; that you robbed him of his title-deeds; and that the old Mexican paid you for your bloody work by transferring to you a portion of that very rancho."

The countenance of Brasse expressed veritable astonishment, and then he showed his teeth with an unpleasant smile.

"If this was not such a serious subject, Mr. Brooke, I could not help laughing," he said. "You have conjured up such a wild and improbable story, that it is really ludicrous, and I am afraid your mind is disordered."

"It is, indeed, a very serious matter, as you will discover. The worst of it is, that you, after having murdered Mr. Horton in cold blood, have had the atrocious assurance to make love to his daughter, and actually to carry her off from her family and her friends."

"Is that what troubles you?" asked Brasse, suppressing a sneer. "Let me first settle that matter, and I promise you that the other shall then be explained to your satisfaction. If I do love Miss Horton, I have as good a right to as any other man, and she has a right to love me in return."

"Do you mean to insinuate that Helen Horton loves you, you vile scoundrel?" angrily exclaimed Walter.

"You may as well be sparing of your epithets, Mr. Brooke. They are not only uncalled for, but are very impolite. The young lady has promised to marry me, and that is sufficient for the present."

"To marry you! Have you forced her to that? You had better not trifle with me."

"I am not trifling with you, Mr. Brooke, but am telling you the plain truth. She left your father's house with me according to the wish of her mother, and not against her own desire. She is entirely satisfied, and she sent you her best wishes, together with a letter, which I shall have the pleasure of handing to you. I have been looking for you, for the purpose of giving it to you."

"Give me the letter," said Walter, in a more quiet tone, but with a frowning brow and compressed lips.

Brasse handed him a paper, and he opened it and read it nervously. It was as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND, WALTER BROOKE: I hope you will not be angry, when I tell you that I have thought best to yield to my mother's wishes, and to promise to marry Mr. Howard Brasse. You know the circumstances, and I hope you can excuse me, if I need any excuse. Mother was greatly troubled in mind, because we were left dependent by the death of my father, and she persuaded me to accept the liberal offer of Mr. Brasse. By this marriage we will become possessors of the hacienda of Los

Sancillos, the very estate which my father had intended to purchase. I can not say that I love Mr. Brasse; but I esteem him very highly, and have no doubt that I will love him as a wife should love her husband.

"Sincerely your friend,

HELEN HORTON."

Walter Brooke did not crush this ill-omened missive in his hand, nor did he angrily tear it in pieces. On the contrary, he carefully and calmly folded it up, and placed it in his pocket.

"Did Miss Horton write that letter?" he asked.

"Of course she did. Do you not recognize the hand writing?"

"It is her hand, undoubtedly. What means were used to obtain it from her?"

"None at all, I solemnly assure you. She wrote it of her own free will, without any suggestion of mine, and requested me to have it delivered to you. Does it read as if I had a hand in its composition?"

"It does not, I admit. Well, sir, that question is settled; but there is another matter which you promised to clear up when this was disposed of."

"Concerning the murder of Mr. Horton. I am ready to do so. After the trial of old Bill Syee, I became convinced, from several circumstances that fell under my notice, that he was not the man who killed Mr. Horton."

"I came to the same conclusion, and I became convinced that you were the murderer."

"May I ask what led you to form such an opinion?"

"One circumstance was, that you were in possession of a pistol that belonged to Mr. Horton. You dropped it on the battle-field of San Jacinto."

"I was just about to speak of that pistol," replied Brasse, without exhibiting the least surprise. "I was not aware, until some time after I purchased it, that it had belonged to Mr. Horton. Then I naturally suspected the man from whom I bought it of having been connected with the murder, and other circumstances have occurred to strengthen the suspicion. I am on his trail, but have not as yet obtained any positive proof of his guilt, for you must admit that the possession of the pistol amounts to little as evidence. I have no doubt,

however, that I will soon be able to extort a confession from him, and I hope to have it before your friend is called upon to suffer. Is this satisfactory to you, Mr. Brooke?"

"As far as it goes. How am I to account for your emerging so suddenly from the position of a seedy adventurer, into that of a moneyed man and a landowner?"

"You are not called upon to account for it, Mr. Brooke nor am I obliged to disclose to you my circumstances or my dealings. But I would like to satisfy you, though this is a delicate subject. An appearance of wealth—though I do not claim to be wealthy—would have rendered me liable to the visitations of the marauders with which this country abounds. I will say to you in confidence, that I invested the greater part of my available means in the purchase of the rancho of Los Sancillos, and that the purchase was made to effect an object that was near to my heart. In fact, Mr. Brooke, it was connected with that letter which I gave you. If you wish for any more information—"

"It is enough!" hoarsely exclaimed Walter. "I wish to hear no more upon that subject. You have gained your end, and I hope that Miss Horton may have no cause to repent of her—bargain."

"I am glad that I have satisfied you, Mr. Brooke. I will see Judge Deems at the expiration of the time that was allowed to old Bill Syee, and then, if I have not proof enough to clear him, I can at least make such a statement as will induce the judge to postpone the execution. Is there any thing else you wish to know?"

"Nothing at all."

Brasse rode on with a smile and a bow, and Walter Brooke moodily went his way, pondering the inconstancy of women, and wondering what object he should now find to execute his vengeance upon. He felt that he had been cheated out of his dues, and was neither fully convinced nor entirely satisfied.

CHAPTER IX.

A RACE FOR A VICTIM.

AT the expiration of sixty days from the time of the trial of old Bill Syee, there was again a large gathering at Barnham's tavern, for it was the day appointed for the hanging of the old hunter.

Thither came, as on the previous occasion, hunters and half-breeds, Mexicans and mestizoes, rancheros and rough-riders, proprietors and peons, the same motley mixture of good, bad and indifferent, all in good spirits and disposed to be hilarious, for Texas was free, and a hanging was an unusual occurrence in that locality.

Thither came Judge Deems, more pompous and important than ever. It was the greatest occasion of his life, not excepting his marriage; for it was *his* hanging, and he considered that the people of Texas ought to be greatly indebted to him for the edifying spectacle.

Thither came Colonel Brooke and several other gentlemen of wealth and large estates; for Judge Deems wished that this—the first vindication of the sovereignty of the law in that portion of the country—should be made as impressive and respectable as possible, and he had, therefore, been anxious to secure the presence of these magnates. He was not without his fears, also, that the “crowd” might again attempt some interference, and he wished to be well backed up by those who were in favor of law and order.

Thither, also, came Walter Brooke, gloomy, sad, and dispirited, filled with bitter feelings toward all mankind. He did not come to witness the hanging, but to make another effort to avert it, and to save his friend, the old hunter. He expected to meet Howard Brasse, who had promised to be present and interfere in behalf of old Bill Syee. Since his conversation with that individual, he had entertained serious doubts as to the truth of the statements that had been made to him by Brasse, and he was now fully determined, if Brasse

should not furnish proof to clear both Syce and himself, to visit upon him the vengeance which he had been thus far prevented from executing.

Thither did not come Howard Brasse, greatly to the chagrin and displeasure of Walter Brooke, who was thus doubly disappointed and rendered more indignant than ever. In vain did the young gentleman look for him and inquire about him among the motley crowd; he was not to be found or heard of. He had promised to visit Judge Deems at the expiration of the time allowed to the convicted hunter; but the judge had not seen him, and knew nothing about him. Walter was forced to the conviction that he had been miserably deceived by the man, and cheaply cheated out of his vengeance. He was, therefore, in a very unenviable state of mind.

Thither, also, did not come old Bill Syce, greatly to the surprise and disappointment of all, but of none more than Walter Brooke. Walter would have been willing to stake his life on the certainty that the old man would make his appearance punctually at the time appointed. Judge Deems would no sooner have believed that Bill Syce would fail to come up and be hanged, than he would have believed that the sun would stand still in the heavens.

None, in fact, had felt any doubt that the old hunter would perform his promise, that he would come forward at the expiration of the time appointed, and submit to his sentence, whether it was right or wrong.

It was morally certain that the hanging could not take place without the presence of the old man. He was the chief actor, and the tragedy could not go on without him. The acting sheriff was there, with a new rope, neatly knotted for the occasion, and the twelve jurymen were there, to witness the execution of the law upon the man who had been convicted by their voices; but he who had been tried and sentenced, who was to furnish the chief figure in the spectacle, to "point the moral and adorn the tale," was wanting, and the performance was nothing without him.

It was no wonder that the "crowd," including the magnates, were angry as well as disappointed, and that they sought for some object upon which they might vent their indignation.

All were very hot against old Bill Syce, that grand delinquent,

whose atrocious failure to keep his plighted word had so greatly disappointed their just expectations; but he, not being present, could not be harmed by their denunciations, and their wrath demanded a tangible victim. Some turned their reproaches upon Walter Brooke, who had endeavored to clear the old hunter, and who had always upheld his innocence; while others were angry with Judge Deems, through whose clemency the convicted murderer had been allowed to go at large until that day.

"Wait a while, gentlemen," said the judge. "It can't be that any man—especially such a man as old Bill Syce—would break his word in this way. He promised, just as solemnly as a man could promise, that he would come here and be hanged when the sixty days were up, and I believed him, and all of you believed him; so there is none of us to blame. Somethin' must have kep' him away, for Bill Syce ain't a man to tell lies, whatever else he mought do. Wait a while, and give him a chance. If he don't show himself here by noon, I shall know what to think of him."

Walter Brooke endeavored to turn the current of popular indignation against Howard Brasse, detailing his suspicions of that individual, relating the circumstance of the discovery of one of Mr. Horton's pistols, and recounting the substance of his last interview with Brasse, at which the latter had declared his belief in the innocence of Bill Syce, and had promised to be present on this occasion, with proofs to clear him, or to make such a statement as should at least cause a postponement of the execution.

He found some listeners, but the fact remained that old Bill Syce had broken his solemn promise to come and be hanged, and consequently nothing could be said in his favor. Judge Deems said that Walter's arguments were neither here nor there, that a man who had been convicted and sentenced ought to be hanged, and that it was too late to talk of his innocence.

The young gentleman declared it as his belief that Bill Syce was not a man to break his word if he was able to keep it, and said that he had no doubt that the old man would be present if he was alive and in a condition to come. If he did not appear, it could only be concluded that he was dead or disabled.

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Twelve o'clock passed, but the delinquent did not present himself. One o'clock and two o'clock went by, but he did not arrive, and the disappointed crowd, finding no further solace in the contents of Pete Barham's grocery, were beginning to depart; when a man rode up, who stated that he had seen Bill Syce, the night before, skulking in a thicket near the nine-mile prairie. He had spoken to him, but the old hunter had run away without answering, seeming anxious to avoid him.

This was sufficient to give vent and direction to the tide of popular feeling. It was at once resolved to set out in pursuit of the man who had so basely broken his pledged word as to fail to come and be hanged according to his promise, to capture him, and to compel him to fulfill his contract.

Then there was "mounting in hot haste," the judge, the acting sheriff, the twelve jurymen, the magnates and the "crowd" generally, all scrambling upon the backs of their respective steeds, and clamoring to be led to the place where the fugitive had been seen. The man who had seen him offered his services as a guide, and all set off in hot pursuit.

Among the foremost in this chase was Walter Brooke. His championship of old Bill Syce had been suddenly changed into a bitter enmity by the intelligence that the hunter was alive and in hiding. Filled with harsh and revengeful feelings, and anxious to find some one upon whom the weight of his anger might justly fall, it must be confessed that he was almost glad to learn that Bill Syce had really broken his word, and was really endeavoring to escape the doom to which he had promised to submit. If the old man, in his innocence and simplicity, had presented himself to be hanged, Walter would have been ready to defend him with his life; but he had broken his word, and forfeited all claim to the friendship of an honest man. Helen Horton had taught the young gentleman to disbelieve in human nature, and now he was even prepared to doubt whether Bill Syce had not really been guilty of the crime with which he was charged.

The pursuers had crossed the nine-mile prairie, and had entered the broken and timbered country beyond it, when they came to a halt at the edge of an arroyo, which was bordered on each side by heavy thickets.

"It was about here that I saw him," said the guide.

"And there he is!" exclaimed Judge Deems.

On the other side of the arroyo, within half a rifle-shot of the place where they had halted, was an old man, seated on a lean and dilapidated gray horse. He was riding leisurely across an opening, with his head bent down, seemingly lost in thought. He heard Judge Deems' exclamation, raised his head, glanced at the group on the other side of the arroyo, and then dashed off into the thicket.

He was at once recognized by all, for there was no mistaking that tall and gaunt form, with those sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, for any one but old Bill Syee. Yelling like hounds that have found the scent of their prey, the whole party started in pursuit.

Headed by Walter Brooke, they scrambled down into the arroyo, and up the other side, and rode through the thicket in the direction that had been taken by the fugitive.

On went the headlong pursuit, over hill and down ravines, through tangled thickets and the rough beds of water-courses, across belts of prairie and beautiful glades of timber.

Now and then they caught sight of the gaunt gray horse and the tall and ghostly figure, and the next moment they would lose him, as he disappeared in a ravine or over the crest of a hill. They rode rapidly, at the top of their speed, while here and there a horse and his rider would go down with a crash; but, ride as fast as they could, they did not gain on the gray horse, which seemed to go over and through all obstacles as if he was made of air. Some were ready to swear that the bones of that skeleton steed rattled like log-chains as he flew before them, and others affirmed that bullets bounded back from his hide with a louder report than that of the explosion of the powder that propelled them. It is certain that neither the horse nor the rider seemed to be hurt, although several shots were fired, and that the speed of the animal increased, rather than slackened.

It was evident that the fugitive was making for the swamp in which the various water-courses lost themselves, and the efforts of the pursuers were directed to heading him off or overtaking him before he could reach it. But his course was straight onward, and it was impossible to turn him. Besides, the horses of the pursuing party were becoming fatigued, while

the speed and endurance of his own seemed undiminished.

It was nearly dark when they reached the swamp, and there, just at the edge, lay the grim gray horse, breathing his last. His rider, whom he had so faithfully served to the last gasp, had disappeared in the depths of the morass. Judge Deems, with most of the party, halted at that point, but a few plunged recklessly into the swamp, in the vain hope of overtaking the fugitive hunter.

Walter Brooke, who was well mounted, and who was an excellent rider, rode in advance of his companions during the pursuit, and, when the party halted, he at once dashed into the swamp, easily outstripping the few who attempted to follow him.

He had wandered about for nearly half an hour, when he found himself alone and lost; for, when he concluded to give up the pursuit and return to his companions, he discovered that he could not retrace his steps, or determine what direction to take to get out of the swamp.

He was in a pleasant oak glade, surrounded by the dark and treacherous morass, when the beams of the newly-risen moon burst through the obscurity, and poured a flood of mellow radiance about him.

As he looked around he started, and his horse snorted and shivered with fear; for, as if it was an exhalation of the swamp, there rose up before him a tall and gaunt form, and the effulgence of the moonlight revealed the haggard features of old Bill Syce.

"Don't be skeered, Walter; it's nobody but me," said the old man, as he stepped out into the glade. "As you hav come so far to look fur me, you ought to see me; though I didn't think, Walter, that you would jine those men to hunt me down."

Half ashamed of himself for the part that he had taken in the pursuit, and touched by the mild but reproachful tone of his old friend, Walter was at first unable to answer; but he attempted to conceal his vexation and endeavored to vindicate his course.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, angrily. "Why are you hiding in this swamp? Don't you know that yo

promised to be at Barham's tavern to-day, to meet Judge Deems and the rest?"

"To be strung up like a dog, fur killin' a man I never harmed. You know they had no business to hang me, Walter; but I meant to keep my promise when I made it, and I would hev kep' it if I ha'nt been drawed off by suthin' pow-erful."

"What hindered you from coming?"

"If you remember, Walter, when I last saw you, I said that I was goin' to s'arch fur suthin'. I hev been s'archin' fur it ever sence, and am on the track, and don't want to leave it while the trail is warm. I mean to straighten this thing out if I ken, and then they may do what they please with me. I reckon it won't huit 'em to put off the hangin' fur a little while."

"What have you found, Bill? Are you sure you are on the right track?"

"I think I am, Walter; but I can't say anythin' more, fur fear I mought be wrong. I must git it cleared up in my own mind before I try to tell you. I wish I could read writin'. Jest look at this bit of paper, Walter, and tell me whose handwrite it is."

Walter took the torn scrap of paper, and examined it carefully.

"This is Mr. Horton's handwriting," said he, "and it seems to be some notes or memoranda, but part of them have been torn off. I should judge from it that he had given Gaijo \$9,000 in cash, and his note for \$3,000. There are some items of stock, furniture, and other articles, I think, figured up, amounting to \$420."

"I am on the right track, then. I see my way tol'able clear now. Give me the paper, Walter, and go home, fur I must work my way alone in this business. What I am doin' is to help you a heap, I hope, as well as to clear up the trouble about the shootin' of Mr. Horton."

Seeing that the old man was bent on pursuing his investigations alone, Walter told him of the disappearance of Helen Horton with Brasse, and related the substance of his last interview with that individual.

"That helps me a little," said the old man. "He was

partly lyin' to you, and partly he wasn't. I've been watchin' him mighty close."

"Where did you find that paper, Bill?"

"Not far from here. I wish you would go home now, Walter, and tell Judge Deems and the rest of them that they needn't give themselves any trouble about me, fur I will turn up arter a while. At the end of three days, I reckon, I will be ready fur 'em. If I don't come to Barham's then, you will be apt to find me at the old hut at the end of nine-mile peraira."

"I am willing to go, as you wish me to, but I must confess that I don't know how to get out of this swamp."

"I will show you. Follow me, Walter."

The old hunter led the way to the edge of the swamp, where he took leave of his young friend, who rode homeward in a very perplexed and mystified state of mind.

CHAPTER X

FRIENDS, OR FOES?

WE must take the reader back a few steps in our narrative, and must introduce him to some rather disreputable characters; but the association will be a brief one, and he may cut their acquaintance as soon as he pleases.

In one of those rugged ravines that characterized the broken country west of the nine-mile prairie—the same place, in fact, to which young Juan Salas was taken when he was captured by Jack Gurtch and his crew—a number of rough and villainous-looking fellows were collected one evening, a short time after the shooting of Robert Horton.

Against the side of a rock was built a rude hut of poles and boughs, thatched with prairie-grass. In front of this they were seated on the ground, around the embers of a fire which had been used for cooking their evening meal. All were smoking, and during their conversation, frequent applications were made to a black bottle that was passed around.

Their speech plainly told what was indicated by their appearance, that they were cattle-stealers and depredators in general, villains who had fled or been driven from the States, whom there was no law in Texas to punish, and who lived by preying upon travelers and the scattered settlers.

Chief among them was a short and sturdy man, with red hair, brutal countenance, and a ragged, dirty and unkempt appearance. This individual was more assiduous than any of the others in his devotion to the bottle; but he seldom opened his mouth to speak, unless he was personally appealed to, when he answered briefly and gruffly.

"I wonder what's the matter with Jack Gurtch," said one of the party. "He is mightily in the dumps, and hasn't seemed like himself for a week or more."

"That's a fact," added another. "I should reckon he had something on his conscience, if he had a conscience to trouble him."

"He has been taking too much rum aboard, and it has given him the horrors," suggested a third.

"You chaps had better leave me alone, and you will do it if you know what's best fur you," growled Gurtch. "How I feel, or what I'm thinkin' about, is no consarn of yours, and you'd better not make it your business, or some of you will git hurt."

The red-headed desperado concluded by emptying the rest of the contents of the black bottle into his capacious mouth, and his companions, knowing his fierce and revengeful temper, ceased their attempts at jesting. They said nothing more to him, but resumed their conversation, which was a mixture of boastful tales of past marauding exploits, and plans for future depredations.

As they were thus engaged, footsteps were heard coming through the forest, and all sprung to their feet as two men approached the hut. One of them was instantly recognized and greeted by the marauders, but the other was evidently a stranger, and was regarded with suspicion.

"What makes you look at the stranger that way?" asked the newly-arrived friend. "Do you think I would bring a man here who wasn't all right and safe? I have brought you a friend, a man of the right stamp. He is fresh from

the States, with all the latest news and the latest dodges, and some of you ought to know him. Jack Gurtch must remember him, anyhow, for he says that he remembers Jack well. Hallo, old red-head, here's Howard Brasse, from Mississippi. Don't you know him?"

"Yes, I know him," growled Gurtch, who sat and shivered as if he had the ague, without raising his head or looking the new-comers in the face.

"Gurtch has got the horrors, sure enough," remarked one of the marauders.

"He is sulky and cross as a bear with a sore head," said another.

"This is a strange way to welcome an old friend and comrade, Jack," said Brasse, a neatly but seedily dressed individual, as he stepped forward and held out his hand to Gurtch.

"I hope," he continued, "that you don't hold old grudges so long as to harbor one against me. I taught you all you know, Jack, and made a man of you."

"Such a man!" grumbled Gurtch. "You made a devil of me, Ben Spidell, or whatever you call yourself, and you ought to have been killed fur it."

"It's hard to spoil a bad egg, Jack," laughed Brasse. "Let bygones be bygones, old fellow, and let us be friends, now we have met here in the wilderness."

"Ain't you afraid of me?" asked Gurtch, looking up with a savage expression.

"Not a bit of it."

"I reckon you would be if you knew how near I had come to killing you. But you are safe from me now, fur I can't do that thing twice, bad as I am."

"What do you mean, Jack?"

"Never mind what I mean. I tell ye it's best fur me to keep clear of you, and it will be healthy fur you to keep out of my way."

"Nonsense! You talk foolishly, Jack. Give me your hand, and let us take a new start in friendship. You seem to be a little down at the heel, now, but I can set you up in the world."

"Here's my hand, Ben Spidell, or Howard Brasse, or whatever name it may suit you to be called by. I can't say that

my heart goes with it, and I advise you to steer clear of me, fur thar's no tellin' what sort of a devil may git the upper hand of me."

Quiet being thus restored, the black bottle was replenished, and Howard Brasse entered into conversation with the marauders, giving them the news from the "States," which was listened to with great eagerness by all.

The talk was kept up until a late hour in the night, when the company broke up, the marauders seeking their several haunts, and none were left but Jack Gurtch and Howard Brasse.

"Do you allow to stay with me?" asked Gurtch, as his unwelcome visitor showed no disposition to leave him.

"Of course I do, Jack," replied Brasse. "When I find an old friend, I am in no hurry to leave him. Besides, I have many things to talk with you about. What did you mean, Jack, by saying that you had come near killing me?"

The gaze of the seedy but gentlemanly adventurer seemed to exert a strange fascination over the rough and dirty outlaw, who yielded at once to the superior mind of his companion.

"You will draw it out of me, whether I am willing or not," said he, "and I mought as well tell you; but I want you to keep it quiet, fur I hain't said a word about it to any one. I did kill a man, by mistake, meaning to kill you. I heerd you were comin' into this country, and heerd which way you were travelin', and I laid for you, day and night. At last you came along, or I thought you did, and I took a good aim from behind the bushes, and fired, and you dropped off from your hoss, dead. I rau up to look at you, and it wasn't you, at all. I had shot the wrong man."

"That was lucky for me."

"It was, indeed. I said, then, that you were safe from me, as I had killed one man fur you and I couldn't do that ag'in."

"You take it very hard, Jack, for a man of your build and habits; but I am glad that you have concluded to quit that business, as I had rather not be shot at from the bushes."

"You are safe from me now, I say, unless the devil gets the upper hand of me."

"Did that happen about a week ago, Jack?"

"Yes; thereabouts."

"Was it where the wood goes down from the prairie to the bed of an arroyo, through a bad pass?"

"Yes."

"Was the man's name Horton?"

"That's what it was. How did you find out so much about it?"

"Easily enough; but you need give yourself no trouble as no one knows it but me, and I am safe. I suppose you know that a man has been arrested, charged with killing Mr. Horton."

"Old Bill Syce."

"Yes. They mean to hang him, I think, and we must see to it, for your safety, that it is done."

"How can we see to it?"

"I will arrange all that, and you need not bother your head about it. Do you ever play euchre nowadays, Jack?"

"Since you cleaned me out, I've been trying to learn, and I ken beat 'most everybody about here."

"Perhaps you can beat me. Would you like to play a game?"

"If we had some keards."

"I always carry a deck. What shall we play for?"

The stakes were easily arranged, and the two men were soon absorbed in a game that was intensely interesting to them, in the course of which every thing else was forgotten. At the expiration of an hour the game was virtually at an end, for Gurtch discovered that he was "broke," his money and other possessions having gradually passed into the hands of his astute companion.

"Durned if I ain't cleaned out!" he exclaimed. "It is allers my luck, when I play with you."

"Won't you try another game?" said Brasse, with an insinuating smile.

"Don't fret me, when I hain't got a button to play with. I wish I had killed you, instead of t'other chap."

"You are talking foolishly. I saw you have a big pocket-book a while ago, and it seemed to be pretty well filled."

"It's the wallet I took from the man I shot, but there's nothin' in it except some no-count papers."

"I will play you for that, and will put up what I have

won against it. I am only playing for sport, Jack, and don't want to win your money."

Gurtch placed a large pocket-book on the ground, and the game proceeded. The advantage could hardly be said to be with either party, until the close of the game, when Brasse made a "march," and won.

He smiled as he took up the pocket-book and opened it; but his smile changed to an expression of intense interest when he examined the papers.

"Are these what you call no-account papers, Jack Gurtch?" he asked. "What would you be worth in this world, without a head to direct you? Here you are letting a fortune slip through your hands, and it is a lucky thing for you that I happened to come from Texas and look you up."

"What do you mean?"

"Here is a deed, to Robert Horton, for a large estate on the Brazos river."

"What of that? Neither of us is Robert Horton."

"We can take his place, and make the paper useful to us."

"I don't know how."

"Let me show you. This deed is dated only ten days ago. The man whom you shot must have been carrying it home when that little accident happened to him. He bought the property from a Mexican, as you can see by the name that is signed to the paper."

"How can I see it?" growled Gurtch. "You know that I can't see any thing of the kind."

"Excuse me, Jack, I had forgotten the defects of your early education. The Mexicans, as you surely must know, are a rascally set, and are always glad of a chance to cheat an American. When the Mexican hears that your Mr. Horton has been killed, and that all his papers were taken from him, he will think that he sees a fine chance to keep both the land and the money that was paid him, and he will deny that he ever executed the deed."

"Like enough. I reckon I would do the same thing, and I am sure that you would. That will be a fine thing for the Mexican, but I don't see how it is to help you or me."

"You must be as blind as a bat, then, Jack Gurtch; you are good for nothing without a head to plan for you. While the

Mexican is chuckling over his good luck, I will present myself to him, with the information that the deed is safe in my hands, and I shall compel him to pay me a good sum of money, to keep me from delivering the paper to those who may be interested in it."

"That will be a very good thing for you, but it won't help me, as the pocket-book and the papers belong to you now."

"I told you, Jack, that I was only playing with you for sport, and that I didn't want to keep what I won. I mean to divide fairly with you, Jack, and you will have cause to say that that shot was the luckiest you ever made."

"I hope so. It hasn't made me feel very comfortable so far. Suppose the Mexican tries to get the wind of you, by accusin' you of killin' the man."

"I must give you credit for some sense and forethought. If he should do so, I could easily prove that I was not in the country at the time. But the thing is, Jack, that he will be much more anxious to get hold of the deed, than of the man who killed Mr. Horton."

"That looks like a plain trail, sure enough," said Gurtech, as his countenance brightened up. "I reckon I may count myself a rich man, Ben, if you do what you have said you will."

"You may rely upon it that I will do the fair thing, Jack."

"Pears to me that I am gittin' sleepy, and it must be e'na'most mornin'. Suppose we finish this bottle, and turn in for a while."

The black bottle was drained, and Gurtech, throwing himself on his blanket in the hut, was soon sleeping soundly. Brasse, notwithstanding his declarations that he meant to act fairly, and that he had only been playing for sport, did not neglect to pocket his winnings, without offering to make restitution of any thing.

He then laid down in the hut, without seeming to have the least fear of the man who so lately sought his life.

CHAPTER XI.

A SUCCESSFUL SPECULATOR.

SEÑOR PEDRO GARJO was comfortably seated in the *patio*, a doorway in his house, resting in his hide-bottomed arm-chair, looking out on the pleasant prospect of a dirty yard, bounded by an ugly adobe wall.

The dirty yard was diversified by a number of chickens and two sorry-looking pheasants, and was enlivened by a few brown and half-naked youngsters, the children of peons, who amused themselves by rolling about in the mud and sunshine, when Señor Garjo did not please to call them to him for the purpose of kicking or pinching them, or pulling their hair.

Señor Garjo was placidly smoking a *cigarrito*, and a rickety table that stood at his side was supplied with corn-husks and tobacco, from which he might manufacture more *cigarritos* when it suited his royal pleasure to do so. On the same table were a glass, a flask of *aguardiente*, and a pitcher of sweetened water; for Señor Garjo had a way peculiar to himself of mixing his drinks, and he prided himself upon it. Sometimes he would pour the *aguardiente* into the sweetened water, and sometimes he would pour the sweetened water into the *aguardiente*:—this was his variety.

Besides his drink and his *cigarritos* and his pleasant prospect, this lord of the manor had another comfort at hand, in the form of a female companion, a brown and ugly, vixenish-looking woman, who sat upon a stool near him, with her hands meekly folded in her lap. It was a part of his pleasant occupation to order this woman about, and to abuse and ill-treat her, except when her own temper became excited, when she would leave the marks of her resentment upon his face and head.

Upon this occasion, we take pleasure in informing the reader, Señor Garjo was in one of his better moods; in fact, he was in an extraordinary good-humor.

It was but a few days since he had learned that Mr. Robert Horton, an American gentleman, to whom he had sold his hacienda of Los Sancillos, had been murdered on his way home, and had been robbed of all his money and papers, including the deed which Señor Garjo had given him for that estate.

As soon as he received this intelligence, the old Mexican had come to the conclusion that the murder was a particularly fine windfall for him; for he had only to deny that he had sold the property, and he would be able to keep Los Sancillos and the money that had been paid to him, as there was no proof of the transaction except such as he could easily suppress.

It was no wonder that he yielded to the temptation, for Los Sancillos (the Little Willows) was a very valuable estate, or would have been so in the hands of an American, though it produced little under the care of Señor Garjo and his lazy peons. As the old Mexican was accustomed to say, "*con maíz y chile y frijoles, no falta nada*"—with corn and red pepper and beans, nothing is lacking—and he did not care to cultivate the soil for any thing but these few Mexican necessities.

Right on the heels of the news of Mr. Horton's death, comes Walter Brooke, a friend of the deceased American, to ask Señor Garjo, in the name of Mr. Horton's widow and child, to "do the fair thing," and confirm them in their title to the hacienda. But Señor Garjo had no idea of "doing the fair thing," and was already prepared with his answer.

He treated Walter Brooke very cavalierly, evinced the utmost surprise at his extraordinary demand, swore that he had not executed a deed nor even made a bargain for the sale of his property, and declared that Mr. Robert Horton had not money enough to purchase such a valuable and unequalled estate as Los Sancillos.

The young gentleman, whose honesty exceeded his diplomacy, went away indignant, leaving Señor Garjo master of the situation. The Mexican felt that, like Alexander Selkirk, his right there was none to dispute, and he rejoiced in the possession of the American's dollars, hoping that another customer might soon come along, when he might emigrate to

Mexico, and buy himself a governorship, or get up a pronunciamiento.

It was in such a good-humor that he was seated in his hole-bottomed chair, smoking his cigarito, sipping his spirits and sweetened water, and looking upon his pleasant prospect of mucky yard and adobe wall, while the dirty children went unpinched, and the ugly woman went unbashed—when there was a noise at the gate, and a stranger was ushered into the yard.

The stranger was an American, and he walked up to the *patio*, and accosted Señor Garjo with a mixture of politeness and impudence, by which the old Mexican was somewhat taken aback.

"Is this Señor Pedro Garjo?" he asked.

"The same, at your service."

"This hacienda, I presume, is known by the name of Los Sancillos."

"Yes."

"My name is Howard Brasse, and I wish to speak with you alone."

"If you have business with me, make it known."

"But you have company here."

"My housekeeper. I have no secrets from her."

"But I may have. My business is important, and I must speak with you alone."

Señor Garjo sent the woman away, and motioned to his visitor to take her seat; but he did not offer him any of his *aguardiente* and sweetened water.

"You have a fine estate here," said Brasse.

"Very fine," replied the Mexican, wincing slightly.

"Would you like to sell it?"

"Perhaps I might be induced to, if an offer should be made sufficiently tempting."

"I heard that you had already sold it to Mr. Horton, an American."

"All a mistake, sir. He wished to purchase it, but we could not agree upon the price."

"Why, then, did you execute and deliver to him a deed of the property?"

"Do you know what you are saying?" exclaimed the

Mexican, suddenly turning pale. "I hope I am not entertaining a deranged person."

"I assure you that you are not. The best of us, Señor Gaijo, especially when we have arrived at your age, are prone to be troubled with fits of forgetfulness. It is possible that you may have executed such a document, and that the occurrence has slipped from your memory. If I should show you the deed, signed by your hand, and witnessed by Señora Francesca Caldera—your housekeeper, I presume—perhaps it might refresh your recollection."

"It would be a strange occurrence," stammered the Mexican. "I will not deny that I have a bad memory. Let me see the paper, if you have it."

Brasse took a sealed document from his pocket, unfolded it, and exhibited it to his companion, at a safe distance from his long fingers.

The Mexican's face turned a sickly yellow, and a cold perspiration started out upon his forehead. It was some time before he could speak, and then the expression of his countenance was malevolent enough to trouble almost any one but Howard Brasse.

"Señor Horton was murdered," he said. "Can you prove that you are not the murderer?"

"Without the least difficulty. I could prove, if it were necessary, that I was, at the time, many miles from where the murder took place. You need not give yourself the least uneasiness on that account, Señor Gaijo. The deed is honestly in my possession. I am not obliged to explain to any one how I obtained it, and I do not expect to do so. Mr. Horton left a wife and daughter, who would be willing to give a large sum for the recovery of this deed. I sympathize with them deeply in their misfortune, and would have taken the deed to them, had I not been sure that you would be able and willing to pay a larger sum than they would."

"I understand you," gasped the Mexican. "How much do you want?"

"Now you are speaking like a man of business, and I can explain myself fully. This would be a fine estate if it was well managed, but it is not of much use to you."

"It is a very valuable estate," stammered the Mexican.

"But you would be willing to sell it, doubtless, and I confess that I would like to become a land-owner in this vicinity. Will you sell me half of your rancho, Señor Garjo?"

"Certainly; if we can agree upon the price."

"That will be easily arranged, as I am disposed to be liberal. For half of this estate, I propose to give you a deed for the whole."

"Half of Los Sancillos?" exclaimed the troubled Mexican. "Your demand is exorbitant."

"On the contrary, it is a very liberal offer. That is my price. I can take no less. You had better give me half the land, than give it all to Mr. Horton's wife and daughter."

"But Señor Horton did not pay me in full. He gave his obligation for three thousand dollars."

"I will give you my obligation, then, for half that amount, for I am inclined to be liberal, and wish to satisfy you. Come, Señor Garjo, it is useless to waste any more time, and you will gain nothing by talking, as I shall not lower my price."

"I will not comply with such an extravagant demand," replied the Mexican. "Leave my house, or I will call in my servants, who will soon dispose of you."

"I doubt whether your servants would be equal to the task, and it is certain that I would not allow you to call them," coolly rejoined Brasse. "Besides, I have left a statement of my business here in the hands of a particular friend, who would know how to attend to it in the event of my disappearance. Produce your writing materials, Señor Garjo, and I will draw the deed, and we will call in the Señora Francesca to witness it. If any formalities are required, they can be attended to at another time."

Señor Garjo grumbly obeyed, and brought forth pen, ink and paper. Howard Brasse wrote the document in a beautiful hand, following the text of Mr. Horton's deed. The old Mexican signed and sealed it, after another ineffectual remonstrance, and Señora Francesca, being called for that purpose, affixed her signature as a witness.

"That is sufficient for the present," said Brasse, as he folded up the paper. "We will reserve the division of the land to some future occasion, as I have no more time to spare now."

"You must give me the other deed," suggested Señor Garjo.

"Certainly. Here it is, together with my obligation for fifteen hundred dollars. I have no doubt that we will agree admirably in our business transactions. I will now bid you good-day. *Adios, Señora Francesca.*"

Without any more delay, the successful speculator crossed the yard, mounted his horse and rode off. It might have been noticed that he put his horse to the top of his speed until he was far away from the hacienda of Los Sancillos. Perhaps he was afraid that the rascally Mexican might contrive some plan to turn the tables on him, or he was in a hurry to put his deed in a place of safety. It is certain that he made the best of his way to the nine-mile prairie, where he duly reported his progress to Jack Gurtch.

Señor Garjo, knowing that it would be useless to send any of his men to follow such a rapid rider, mournfully locked up Mr. Horton's deed and Howard Brasse's note, and sought a vent for his vexation in pinching the dirty children and abusing the ugly woman, until Francesca turned upon him and tore his hair rather savagely.

He then resorted to his *aguardiente* for consolation, and congratulated himself that Santa Aña would soon drive the *mal-ditos Yanquis* out of the country, when he would be rid of Howard Brasse and all his troubles.

CHAPTER XII.

HELEN'S DISCOVERY.

HOWARD BRASSE did not long leave Señor Garjo undisturbed in his reflections and his pleasant family amusements. He had compelled the Mexican to give him half of the Sancillos estate, as that was as much as he could ask of him "in conscience"; but he was not satisfied. The possession of half the estate only begot in him a desire for the whole, and he was determined to gain it, by fair means or foul. He, as well as Señor Garjo, had his ideas of what would be the result of

the invasion of Santa Anna and his Mexicans, and he was prepared to take advantage of the cringed situation of affairs, when Texas should be ruled by Americans. To this end, he wanted to worm himself into the confidence of Señor Garjo, in order that he might, at some future time, denounce him as a public enemy, and frighten him into giving up the remainder of his property.

He remained absent from Los Sancillos only long enough to put his deed in a place of safety, and to witness the trial and sentence of old Bill Syee, and then brought back his smiles, his politeness and his impudence, to plague Señor Garjo.

The old Mexican was put in a very ill-humor by this second visitation, and he treated his guest as if he wished him far away; but Brasse was not to be rebuffed or insulted. He had hardly been three hours at Los Sancillos, when he had persuaded his unwilling entertainer that he had no better friend than Howard Brasse, that no one could serve him better than that individual, and that no one had his interest more at heart.

Señor Garjo was, in fact, so fascinated with his new acquaintance, that he pressed upon him unlimited cognac, and offered to share with him his manorial privilege of pinching the dirty children and abusing the ugly woman.

Brasse was duly thankful for these kindnesses, but was still better satisfied when the old Mexican made a division of the land, allotting to him the part that he had chosen.

It was after the transaction was completed, and while Brasse had gone to ride over the property, to look at his possessions, that Colonel Brooke visited Los Sancillos, for the purpose of purchasing the estate for Helen Horton.

Señor Garjo took advantage of his transfer to Brasse, to rid himself of the importunities of Colonel Brooke, and left the two Americans together, as soon as possible, in order to relieve himself of the burden of talking about the matter.

When Brasse went home with Colonel Brooke, he had a clearly defined purpose in his mind—a purpose which had been dimly outlined before, but had not shaped itself plainly, as he had not seen how he was to carry it out. After he had talked with Colonel Brooke, however, his plan was easily

formed, and he resolved to lose no time in putting it into execution.

He had learned how anxious and troubled Mrs. Horton had been, concerning her lost possession of the hacienda of Los Sancillos, and he thought, if he once could get an entrance to Colonel Brooke's house, on the footing of a visitor, that he might prefer his suit to the daughter, through the agency of the mother, if he could not prevail upon Helen to listen to him. He would represent himself as the owner of Los Sancillos, and would promise to settle the estate upon Helen, if her mother would consent to the marriage. Thus, if the truth concerning the lost deed should ever come out, he would be entitled to the property in the right of his wife, and it would make no special difference, after he was married, how much of his villainy she might discover.

His plan succeeded fully as well as he could have expected. Mrs. Horton, who was by no means a strong-minded woman, was quite taken by the politeness of Brasse, by his appearance of gentility, and by his oily and persuasive manner. She at once concluded that nothing better could be desired for her daughter and herself, than that Helen should marry this gentlemanly Mr. Brasse, who would at once install her as mistress of Los Sancillos, and would settle the estate upon her. She would thus be rendered comparatively independent, and would be enabled to spite Walter Brooke, her dislike for whom had grown to a positive aversion.

Helen's wishes, it is true, did not coincide with her mother's, and all Mrs. Horton's arguments, reproofs and entreaties only served to render that young lady miserable, and to cause her to persist in the declaration that she detested Brasse, and that she would never marry any one if she could not marry Walter Brooke.

But Howard Brasse, never lacking in expedients, soon had a plan formed, which was to overcome all obstacles, and which exactly suited Mrs. Horton's mind and temper.

His plan was, to carry off Helen, against her own will, but with the consent of her mother, so as to put an end at once to Walter Brooke's pretensions, and to relieve Mrs. Horton of all responsibility and embarrassment. He thought that this could be effected easily and quietly, and he would place Helen

in a pleasant restraint at Los Sancillos, until such time as any possible excitement should be quieted down, when she would be joined by her mother, and the marriage would take place.

If Mrs. Horton had not been a weak-minded woman, she would never have consented to such an arrangement, especially when it was proposed by a person with whom her acquaintance had been so brief; but it suited her intellect and her feelings, and it was carried out, as has been seen.

Helen went with Brasse reluctantly, obeying the commands of her mother, and maintained a most obstinate and dignified silence during the ride. As the day was drawing to a close, she insisted upon returning home; but Brasse informed her that it was not his intention to take her home, and at the same time handed her a note which her mother had written for the purpose.

In this note, that misguided lady informed her daughter that the step which Brasse had taken was with her entire concurrence, and urged her to accompany him without any attempt at resistance or remonstrance. Helen would not have scrupled to disobey the parental injunction, if she had been able to escape from Brasse; but she could not help herself, and there was no one upon whom she could call for aid. Her mother had promised to join her in a few days, and she reluctantly submitted to be led away by Brasse.

He took her directly to the hacienda of Los Sancillos, where he told Señor Garjo such a tale as suited him, and left her in the care of the old Mexican, promising to bring her mother to her without delay.

Helen had been but a short time at Los Sancillos, when she made two discoveries. In the first place, she discovered that she was a prisoner, that she was watched and restrained, although she was allowed a certain degree of liberty. In the second place, she discovered that Señor Garjo had fallen in love with her. Neither discovery surprised, but both were very unpleasant to her, especially the latter.

The old Mexican did not scruple or delay to inform Helen of his feelings toward her. He had not been told who she was, and he naturally supposed that Brasse intended some act of villainy toward his fair prisoner. He thought, therefore, that there would be an excellent opportunity for him to

revenge himself upon Brasse, toward whom he felt very bitter when he was away, by stealing his captive and appropriating her to himself.

Accordingly, he sent for Helen, whose quick wit easily divined his purpose, and who summoned up all her fortitude, in order that she might make the best of the circumstances, and turn them to her own advantage.

After a little preliminary conversation, Señor Garjo offered her his heart and hand, assuring her that he was convinced that Brasse did not mean to act fairly by her, and that such a beautiful young lady ought not to think of marrying such a worthless adventurer. If she would marry him, Señor Pedro Garjo, she would become the wife of a gentleman who was rich and of good family, and would become the mistress of his fine estate, known as *Los Sancillos*.

"Mistress of *Los Sancillos*!" exclaimed Helen, with some surprise. "Mr Brasse has told me that he is the owner of this hacienda, and he promised my mother that he would settle it upon me, if I would marry him."

"He is a liar and a paltry scoundrel!" replied Señor Garjo. "He is the owner of nothing, and I could ruin him in a moment if I chose to do so. I have a paper here, which would hang him if I should produce it."

In his excitement, the old Mexican took a key from his pocket, rushed to a bureau, unlocked a drawer, and took out a folded paper.

"This is it!" he exclaimed, flourishing the document before Helen's face. "I hold the life of Señor Brasse in my hand. I have but to say the word, and he is destroyed."

The paper slipped from his fingers, and unrolled as it fell on the floor. Helen glanced quickly at it before he could pick it up, recognized her father's handwriting, and perceived the name of Robert Horton.

She was so excited that she could hardly sit in her chair, and the blood rushed to her face in a torrent; but she controlled herself, by a great effort, and spoke as calmly as ever.

"I have no wish to marry Mr. Brasse," she said. "I am here against my will, and I would gladly escape from him if I could."

"You have only to promise that you will be my wife, and you shall be protected from him," replied the Mexican.

"I am obliged to you for your kind offer," said Helen. "Give me until to-morrow morning to think of it, and then I will be ready to answer you."

Garjo assented, and Helen, after seeing him replace the paper and lock the drawer, went to her room.

Her only thought was, now, to get possession of the paper. That accomplished, she thought that she could set Brasse at defiance, and she did not feel afraid of Señor Garjo. Convincing that the document was very important to herself, she resolved to get hold of it.

Waiting until the evening was well advanced, she stole down to Garjo's room, silently entered it, and found him asleep. She took the keys from his clothes which were hanging near the bed, unlocked the bureau drawer, found the paper, returned the keys to his pocket, departed as noiselessly as she had come, and hurried to her own room.

The document she eagerly examined, and found, to her great joy and surprise, that it was her father's deed to the hacienda of Los Sancillos!

CHAPTER XIII.

DELIVERANCE.

The trail which Juan Salas and his two companions undertook to follow was so plain that they were not obliged to dismount and examine it, and their progress was quite rapid.

It was after nightfall when the half-breed stopped, and pointed toward the west.

"There is the end of the trail," he said.

Across the level plain, could be seen a dark wall and the outlines of the roof of a house.

"We are near the Brazos," said the ranchero, "and the trail must end there; but I must confess that I do not know where we are."

"I know it!" exclaimed Bez Syce. "That is old Pedro

Garjo's place, the hacienda of Los Sancillos. I am glad the trail leads us there, for I would like a chance to ransack the old Greaser's house and regulate him a little. I have a spite against that yellow-skinned rogue."

"Why is it, Ben, that you have a spite against Señor Garjo?"

"For a good reason enough. After the massacre at the Alamo, I made my way toward home as well as I could, hiding and sneaking along, until I got to this place. I had heard that the señor was on our side, and I was tired and hungry enough to ask for food and shelter anywhere.

"I stopped, and asked him to give me something to eat and a pair of shoes. He let me in, and then had me tied and locked up, with scarcely food enough to keep body and soul together, intending to give me up to the first squad of Mexican soldiers that should come along. I managed to break out and get away, and since that time I have been wishing for a chance to pay him for his hospitality. I would like well to ransack his place and give him a good dose of stirrup-leather."

The hacienda of Los Sancillos was inclosed by a high wall made of adobes, or sun-dried bricks. The entrance was by a large and strong gate, which was kept closed at night. Around the wall, on the inside, were the houses of the peons, and at the end opposite the gate was the *casa grande*, or proprietor's house, the *azotea*, or flat roof of which commanded an extensive view of the adjacent country.

Juan Salas and his companions rode up to the gate, where they made a shouting and a clattering loud enough to scare a regiment of Santa Aña's *soldados*.

After some delay, a frightened Mexican showed himself at a bastion near the gate, and demanded, in the name of todos los santos—of all the saints at once—what they wanted.

"We want that American lady who came here lately," replied Juan. "We want her and the man who brought her here."

The Mexican declared that he knew nothing about the matter; but, if the strangers would be pleased to wait a little while, he would speak to his excellency, Señor Garjo, although, as everybody ought to know, his excellency would be ready

to cut off the head of the man who dared to disturb his slumber.

Into his room rushed the frightened Mexican from the bastion, informing his master, with many adjurations and exaggerations, that a large number of Yankees were at the gate, demanding a lady and the man who had brought her.

Garjo hastily donned his clothes, seized a rusty sword, mounted the bastion, and savagely asked the strangers, in the name of the demonio, who they were, and what they wanted.

Juan Salas replied that they had come from the estate of Colonel Brooke, in search of a young lady named Helen Horton, who had been taken from his house, and a man named Howard Brasse, who had carried her off. He had tracked them to the hacienda of Señor Garjo, and had no doubt that they had entered it, and were concealed within.

The old Mexican was at first surprised and a little frightened at learning that the young lady under his roof was the daughter of the man whom he had so deeply wronged; but his surprise was soon mastered by his indignation. He declared that there were no such persons in or about his hacienda, and that, if there were, he would not give them up to a parcel of vagabonds of whom he knew nothing.

"I am sure that they are here," replied Juan, "and they must be given up, or we will enter and take them by force."

"You are nothing but a pack of thieving vagabonds, who want to get in here to steal," said Señor Garjo. "If you try to break that gate you shall be shot down, like dogs as you are, and you had better make yourselves scarce."

The infuriated Mexican then descended from his station, and ordered his servants to make ready their escopetas and other available weapons, to guard the walls and slaughter the *malditos Americanos*.

"I suppose we will have to fight for it," said Juan. "Shall we find a beam to burst this gate open?"

"I know a better plan than that," suggested Ben Syce. "There is a weak place in the wall where I got out, and I doubt whether the lazy Mexicans have mended it. Let us make a circuit, and hide our horses, so that they will think we have gone away, and then we can get in before they know 't."

Ben's advice was followed, and the three friends rode away as if they meant to abandon their attempt; but they soon made a circuit, leaving their horses out of sight, and returned to the wall at the rear of Señor Garjo's house.

Helen Horton, hearing the noise at the gate, listened, and soon learned that her friends were at hand, and that Garjo had refused them admittance.

Finding that all the lower doors were locked, she ascended to the flat roof of the building, and saw three men approaching the wall.

"Is that you, Juan Salas?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Helen. Keep quiet and we will soon be in there."

Señor Garjo, after ordering his retainers to arm and guard the walls, bethought himself of Helen, and determined to lock her up in her room, in order to make sure of her safety.

He hastened into the house for that purpose, but found that she had already gone. As all the doors were fastened, he wisely concluded that she had gone on the roof, and followed, getting up just in time to hear the last words of Juan Salas.

Flying into a passion, he ordered Helen to go down-stairs. When she refused to obey, he threatened to use force, and she appealed to her friends below.

"I would like to shoot him," said Ben Syee, "but it would be best to try another plan. Don't you think, Juan, that you could throw your lasso over the head of the old Greaser?"

"It is a long throw, but I can try," said Juan.

Carefully gathering up his inseparable lasso, he launched the flexible coil with all his force. It flew in graceful circles through the air, and the noose settled down over the head of Señor Garjo, just as he was stepping forward to seize Helen. The ranchero immediately drew it tight, pinioning his arms to his sides, and dragging him toward the edge of the roof. He yelled for help and mercy, and his servants began to hasten to him.

"Stand back, all of you!" shouted Juan, "or I'll pull your master off the roof. Now, Señor Garjo, I will thank you to order your men to let that lady out, and to send her horse with her. You may also tell them to tie Mr. Howard Brasse and send him out."

"Ave Maria purissima! he is not here," shrieked the frightened Mexican.

"Send the lady and her horse, then, and do it quickly."

Señor Garjo, as there was no help for it, gave such orders as his scattered senses allowed him to give, and Helen hastened from the roof. In a short time she passed from the gate, mounted on her own horse, and rode around to her friends.

"Now, Señor Garjo," said Juan, as he slackened the rope, "you may take off my lasso and give it back to me, or I will shoot you where you stand."

The Mexican did as he was ordered, and then, with a howl of rage, dived down into the house.

"Was not Howard Brasse there, Miss Helen?" asked the ranchero, as he hauled in his lasso.

"No. He said he was going back to bring my mother. Let us hasten home, for I have found something of great value."

The party quickly mounted and rode away.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALL IS NOT GOLD THAT GLITTERS.

ALTHOUGH Howard Brasse told Helen Horton, when he left her at Los Sancillos, that he was going for her mother, it was not his intention to do so at that time, for he was in no hurry to visit Colonel Brooke until the excitement consequent upon his late proceedings should have died away.

He did not particularly regret his sudden fit of generosity in offering to divide his ill-gotten gains with his old comrade and victim, for he could easily repudiate that promise; but he was afraid that Gurtch, who knew entirely too much about him, might cause him trouble.

It was necessary, therefore, that Gurtch should be got out of the way; which object he could easily accomplish, and at the same time make a good reputation for himself, by delivering him up as the murderer of Mr. Horton. True, Gurtch

might make some unpleasant disclosures; but Brasse did not intend to give him up until the marriage with Helen Horton was consummated; then the disclosures could not do much harm; the rogue might afford to treat them with contempt.

The first thing was to make matters right with Walter Brooke; for there was no telling what course the indignation of that young gentleman might lead him to adopt. Brasse, therefore, prepared a note, before he left Los Sancillos, in which he exactly imitated the handwriting of Helen Horton—of which he had provided himself a good specimen—intending to seek out Walter Brooke and deliver it to him.

This was done, with what effect has been already detailed.

The promise to Walter that he would interfere to prevent the execution of old Bill Syee, he intended to keep. But, concluding that that day would present an excellent opportunity (Walter and his father being absent) for inducing Mrs. Horton to accompany him to Los Sancillos, he abandoned old Bill in order to accomplish the most important of his schemes, his marriage with Helen Horton.

In this, however, he was unexpectedly baffled by Mrs. Horton herself. He contrived to send her a note, secretly, explaining that he did not wish to present himself at Colonel Brooke's house, requesting her to meet him at a place and hour named, for the purpose of accompanying him to Los Sancillos.

He waited for Mrs. Horton at the appointed place. Instead of coming, however, that weak-minded lady, after considerable delay, caused by irresolution, sent back his messenger with a note, informing him that her wardrobe was not just then in a proper condition for undertaking such a journey, and promising that she would meet him at the place and hour named, without fail, three days later.

The rogue did not feel altogether easy at leaving Helen Horton so long at Los Sancillos; but there was not time enough between the receipt of Mrs. Horton's note and the day appointed by her, for him to go to the Brazos and back, and believing that he had a faithful ally in Señor Garjo, Brasse remained about his former haunts, hoping that he would soon be able to put an end to all his perplexities.

The place which he had appointed for meeting Mrs. Horton

was a pleasant glen in the timbered land near the nine-mile prairie. It was a sequestered spot, which she could easily reach without being observed, and without danger of being molested by any of the rovers of the wilderness.

Thither repaired Howard Brasse, considerably earlier than the hour appointed for the meeting; but he had scarcely tethered his horse when he was startled by a noise among the trees, as of some one approaching.

As the bushes parted, they disclosed, instead of the lady-like figure of Mrs. Horton, the red head, coarse features and slovenly form of Jack Gurtch.

"I am powerful glad to see you, Ben Spidell," said this unwelcome visitor. "What are you doin' all alone here in the woods, and where have you been keepin' yourself fur sech a long time?"

"I am waiting for a person who made an appointment to meet me here. If you are anxious to know what I have been doing since I last saw you, I will tell you. I have been attending to your business and mine concerning the hacienda of Los Sancillos."

"I thought that that business was all settled and fixed up, as you told me it was."

"So it was as far as half the property goes. Half the hacienda belongs to me, or to me and you; but I want to get the whole of it."

"That was allers the way with you, Ben. You allers wanted to grab fur the hull pile. Do you still say that you mean to do the fair thing by me, and make a square divide of what you git out of that job?"

"Of course I do. I won the pocket-book fairly, and you could never have done any thing with the papers; but I promised to divide with you, and I mean to keep my word."

"That's nothin' more'n what's right, as I had the real work to do; but, how can I be sartin that you will do what you say you will?"

"My word ought to be sufficient."

"It ought to be, but it ain't, somehow. Tell you what you may do, Ben:—Jest you give me that paper that the old Mexican gave you, and I will keep it fur both of us."

"I can't do that, Jack."

"But you must. I tell you that. I mean to have it, and you had better give it to me right away."

There was a wicked look in Gurteil's eyes, that made Howard Brasse tremble and turn pale. Without another word, he drew the paper from his pocket, and handed it to Gurteil, confident that it would do his red-headed friend no good, and that he could get it back when he needed it."

"That's all right," said Gurteil. "Now, I would like to know how you expect to git hold of the other half of that property."

"I mean to marry the girl to whom the whole of it really belongs. I have carried her off, and have her safe, and I am waiting here for her mother, who is to go with me to meet her, and then we will be married."

"That looks like a tol'able good plan to cut Jack Gurteil out of his sheer."

"You shall be my major-domo, Jack. You shall always live with me, and shall have as much as I have. I really wish, now, that you would go away, for I am expecting a lady, and you must know, Jack, that I would not like to be seen by her in your company."

"P'raps she won't come. Afore I go, Ben Spidell, I want to know when you mean to give me up and have me hung fur killin' that man."

Brasse started and turned pale again, for there was the same wicked look in Gurteil's eyes that he had seen a short time before. How had this obtuse man guessed his secret thoughts?

"What is the matter with you, Jack?" he asked. "You talk like a crazy man. You have no right to speak to me in that way."

"I am talkin' about what I know, and I have a right to say it. I know what you told Walter Brooke, far he blabbed it all out. I know that I am the man you spoke to him about—the man you meant to give up as soon as you got ready."

"I only said that to quiet him, Jack, to keep him from troubling me; but I never mentioned your name, nor gave him any hint by which he could find you out."

"You can't lie to me any more, Ben Spidell. I know that

you mean to inform on me and give me up, and I mean to put you where you can't do it."

"Hush, Jack! Don't you hear a noise in the bushes?"

"No, I don't hear any noise, and I mean to fix you so that you will never hear any more noises."

With a savage oath, the red-headed ruffian drew his knife, and rushed upon his frightened companion, who turned and attempted to fly.

CHAPTER XV.

A VICTIM FOUND.

BETTIE BROOKE, as it happened, was not without her share of feminine curiosity.

When a strange messenger came to the house with a note, she naturally stopped him, and asked who it was for. When he replied that it was for Mrs. Horton, she told him to wait, and carried it to that lady herself.

Mrs. Horton opened and read it with that troubled and fluttering manner peculiar to persons of weak and undecided character.

"Who is it from?" asked Bettie, her curiosity overcoming her politeness. "You seem to be excited about it. I hope there is no bad news from Helen."

"It is from my daughter," replied the widow, thinking that a little prevarication would be allowable. "She is safe and well, and she wishes me to come to her immediately."

"Where is she?"

"She is at a considerable distance from here, Mr. Brasse informs me, but a good horse will soon take me there."

"As the information comes from Mr. Brasse, I suppose that he is to accompany you."

"He offers to do so," replied Mrs. Horton, forgetting that she had represented the note as coming from her daughter. "He seems to be a fair-minded and honorable gentleman, and I doubt whether Helen could do better than to marry him, especially as he can make her mistress of Los Sancillos."

"Are you going?" asked the inquisitive Bettie.

"How can I go now, my child, when I have nothing fit to wear on such a journey? I must have a little time to prepare, and Helen can wait a day or two, as she is so well situated."

"Of course you must have time to get ready," said Bettie, thinking that it would be as well if Mrs. Horton should not go at all. "It would never do to set out without proper clothes, especially as it is likely that you may have to attend a wedding before you return."

"To be sure. I must ask you to help me, Bettie, and then it will take me two or three days to prepare, as I must carry some things to Helen."

"The boy who brought the note is waiting, Mrs. Horton. Do you wish to send any answer?"

"Yes. I will write one, and you may take it to him."

Mrs. Horton wrote a note, and gave it to Bettie, who took occasion to open it before she delivered it to the messenger. It was to Howard Brasse, informing him that she was not then prepared to accompany him, and appointing a place and hour for the meeting, three days thereafter.

As soon as Walter Brooke returned home, his sister sought him, and informed him of all that had occurred, telling him the place and time which had been fixed on by Mrs. Horton for the purpose of meeting Brasse and accompanying him to visit her daughter.

To Bettie's great surprise, Walter received her communication very coldly, telling her that it was a matter in which he felt no concern or interest, that Helen Horton might marry whomsoever she pleased, and her mother might go wherever she pleased, as he should not trouble himself about either of them any more.

Bettie then told the tale to her father, who also showed little interest in it, and was at first disinclined to interfere. He afterward concluded, however, that his duty to the memory of his dear friend, required him to prevent his wife and daughter from becoming the prey of an unprincipled adventurer, and to take some measures to ascertain who and what Howard Brasse was.

On the morning of the day that Mrs. Horton had appointed

for meeting Brasse, Colonel Brooke saw her, and told her that he knew of her purpose. She was free to do as she pleased and to go where she pleased, he said, but he would see to it that Howard Brasse should not accompany her anywhere, as he meant to be at the rendezvous himself, to have a conversation and a settlement with that individual.

Leaving Mrs. Horton in a very uncomfortable state of mind, the colonel went with Walter to Barham's tavern, where they found a number of people assembled, among whom were Judge Deems, the acting sheriff, and the twelve jurymen who had found Bill Syee guilty of murder. This was the day set by the old hunter for his adjourned hanging, and they still had enough faith in him to believe that he would come forward.

Among the people collected at Barham's was a gentleman from Mississippi, a stranger in Texas, named Lowndes, in whom Colonel Brooke recognized an old friend.

Colonel Brooke related how Howard Brasse had attempted to induce Mrs. Horton to leave his house, after having already taken away her daughter, and how he had made an appointment to meet her in a glen near the nine-mile prairie. He also explained his suspicions that Brasse was no better than he should be, and stated that he intended to meet him at his rendezvous, in place of Mrs. Horton, for the purpose of finding out who and what he was, and of having a settlement with him.

Walter renewed his charges against Brasse, as having been connected with the murder of Mr. Horton, and gave it as his opinion, from facts that were known to himself, that old Bill Syee would probably be found at no great distance from Howard Brasse, if he did not make his appearance at Barham's that morning.

It was agreed, that if the condemned hunter did not come forward by ten o'clock, they should all go and look for him, at the place where Walter supposed him to be, and at the same time should go with Colonel Brooke to meet Howard Brasse. Judge Deems had not forgotten the part that had been taken by Brasse at the trial of Bill Syee, and the contempt that he had shown for the court, and he was willing enough to take advantage of an opportunity to punish him.

As the old hunter did not make his appearance by ten o'clock, the whole party mounted their horses, and set off toward the nine-mile prairie, on their second search for a victim.

They went first to the glen where Howard Brasse had made the appointment to meet Mrs. Horton, and a few of them dismounted and tethered their horses at a little distance from the place, while the others made a circuit for the purpose of surrounding the glen, as Colonel Brooke said that there was no telling what might be found there, and it would be well to be prepared to capture any one who should attempt to escape.

Having given the horsemen time enough to surround the glen and take their stations, those who were on foot went forward cautiously and quietly.

Judge Deems and Walter went together through the bushes, looking carefully ahead and on each side as they went. They had not gone far, when they heard voices down in the glen, raised as if in anger, and they quickened their steps.

In a few moments Walter stopped and touched his companion on the arm, pointing to a man who was stooping in the bushes a short distance ahead of them. There was no mistaking that tall and gaunt figure for any one but old Bill Syce, and Judge Deems stepped forward softly, and laid his hand on the hunter's shoulder.

"What in thunder are you doin' here, Bill Syce?" he asked. "Why didn't you come up and be hanged, as you promised to? This is the second time that you have disapp'nted us, after passin' your word, and it ain't actin' a bit like a gentleman to treat us in that way."

The old man was so absorbed in gazing at something below, that he did not at first notice the approach of Judge Deems and his companion, or seem to comprehend what was said. His eyes seemed to be almost starting out of their sockets, and there was an anger, strained expression on his haggard features, as if some extraordinary excitement was working on his mind.

"Those are the men!" he exclaimed, in a broken and trembling voice. "One is jest as bad as t'other, and we must take 'em both. It's all clear now. See! the big 'un has drawed his knife, and wants to do more murder. They will git away! No, they shan't, ef I hev to kill 'em both."

As quick as thought, he raised his rifle and fired. The report was followed by a cry and a fierce oath. At the same moment Colonel Brooke and the others rushed down into the glen, and Bill Syce quickly followed their example, together with Judge Deems and Walter.

On the ground at the bottom of the glen lay red-haired Jack Gurtch, rolling about and cursing, his brutal countenance looking uglier than ever, for he had been shot through the side. Howard Brasse, scared and piteous, was slowly limping away.

"That's the man who did it!" exclaimed Bill Syce, pointing to the prostrate ruffian. "He is the one who killed Mr. Horton. I heerd him tell t'other one so, and he said that t'other one was goin' to inform on him and give him up. You may hang me now as soon as you want to, but that's the man who did it!"

"Is this true, Jack Gurtch?" asked Colonel Brooke. "You have led a hard life, I know, but I did not suspect you of such a crime. You had better tell the truth before you die, for I see that you have not long to live."

"I reckon I'm done fur this time, sure enough," groaned Gurtch. "I did kill Mr. Horton, but I didn't mean to. I shot him in mistake fur that infernal villain, Ben Spidell, or Howard Brasse, as he calls himself now. I hope you will hang him, fur he desarves hangin' ten times as much as I do."

"What did you do with the papers that were in Mr. Horton's pocket? If you will give them up, you can yet right some of the wrong that has been done."

"He has got 'em all. Nobody has gained anythin' by the shootin' but him. Stop him, some of you, or he will run off afore I ken see him hung."

Judge Deems and Walter Brooke already had overtaken Brasse. They brought him up to the side of his dying comrade.

"That's him," said Gurtch. "He took the papers from me, and said that he had made the old Mexican give him half the property, and that he meant to marry the gal and git it all. If you don't make him stretch hemp you'll be sorry fur it."

"Is this true?" asked Colonel Brooke, turning to Brasse. "What have you done with the papers that were taken from Mr. Horton?"

"I shall not answer," replied Brasse. "I am not bound to reply to charges made by that cutthroat, who fell upon me here in the woods and tried to murder me."

"I have no doubt that we will find a way to make you answer. Hallo! who comes here?"

A horseman rode through the trees, who leisurely surveyed the group in the glen for a moment, and then turned and called to some one behind him.

"Come on, Juan! These are friends here, and something more."

CHAPTER XVI.

CLEAR SKIES.

JUAN SALAS rode down into the glen, accompanied by Helen Horton and two young men.

Colonel Brooke stepped forward, with his accustomed gallantry, and assisted Helen to alight. She was trembling with joy and excitement.

Walter also made a motion, as if to step forward and greet her; but, he stopped suddenly, with a haughty brow, and coldly stood aloof. Helen noticed this, as she looked at him wistfully, and the tears started in her eyes, but she did not speak to him.

"What is the matter? What does this mean?" she asked, shuddering as she looked at the ugly figure of Jack Gurtch.

"It is something that you need not see, my child," replied the colonel. "I am glad that you have returned in safety. How did you succeed in doing so?"

"I would not have been able to escape, if it had not been for the bravery and skill of Juan Salas and his friends."

"I have very important news to tell you now, Helen. We have found the man who killed your father. That is he, who is lying there dying, and old Bill Syce is clear."

"Is the old man clear?" exclaimed another voice, and Ben Syce eagerly rushed forward. "Is that true, Colonel Brooke? Is my father really clear of that charge?"

"He is. There lies the man who did the deed, and he has confessed it."

"Jack Gurtch! I wouldn't have believed that he would commit murder, but I am glad it was not the old man. This is the best news that I have heard in a long time. I hoped it might turn out so, though I couldn't really think it would. Hallo, old man! Don't you know your own son?"

Old Bill Syce had been looking at his son with a wondering, half-stupid gaze, as if doubting whether he was a living being or an apparition. When, however, Ben spoke to him, and held out his hand, his nature gave way, and he burst into tears as he fell on the young man's neck.

"Bless the Lord, ag'la and ag'in!" he said, in a voice that was choked by his sobs. "It is really my own boy, come back from the grave. The lost is found, and the dead is alive. Praise the name of the Lord, fur all is clear now!"

The attention of all was now called to Jack Gurtch, who was breathing his last.

"I'm goin' now," he gasped. "I'm mighty sorry that I killed Mr. Horton, but that's no use in cryin' over it. I hope the Old Master up above will have mercy on me, but that's no use in askin' fur that. I wish I could live to see Ben Spidell hung, but I'll b'ar witness ag'inst him whar I'm goin'. Take keer of him, and see that he gits his deserts, fur he is an almighty villain. He took them papers, and you mustn't let him lie out of it."

With these words he turned over, groaned, and expired.

Colonel Brooke turned upon Brasse with a threatening air, and ordered him to tell what he had done with Mr. Horton's papers.

"I know nothing about them," he calmly replied. "I have never seen them, and have had nothing to do with them. It is very strange if you will believe the spiteful assertions of that dead wretch, in preference to the word of a gentleman. I have lately had reason to suspect that he was the murderer of Mr. Horton, and I mentioned my suspicions to Mr. Walter Brooke. I was endeavoring to obtain some certain evidence,

and it was for that reason that he set upon me and tried to kill me."

"I can vouch for his speaking to me about his suspicions," said Walter, "although he did not mention the name of the man he suspected. The only explanation of the matter that I can suggest is this:—Having got possession of the deed, he has carried it to old Señor Garjo, who has bought him off by giving, or promising to give him, a portion of the land."

"I reckon that's what I heerd 'em talkin' about here awhile ago, though I couldn't then make out what they meant," suggested Bill Syee. "As fur his not havin' had any of Squire Horton's papers, I know that's a lie, fur here is one that I saw him drop, and I picked it up."

"I think I can settle this question," said Helen Horton. "Here is my father's deed to the hacienda of Los Sancillos. Will you examine it, Colonel Brooke, and see if it is what I suppose it to be?"

"You are right, my child," replied the colonel, after he had glanced over the paper. "This is a deed to your father, and no one but his heirs can be the owners of Los Sancillos. Where did you find it, Helen?"

"In a drawer at Señor Garjo's house. He boasted that he had a paper that could hang Howard Brasse, and showed me this. I stole it from him, I confess; but I had a right to steal my own property."

"Just as I supposed," said Walter. "Brasse traded the deed to the old Mexican."

"You might make out a fine case against me by suppositions, but suppositions are no proof," said Brasse, boldly.

"Do you still deny that you had that deed, and that you gave it up to Señor Garjo?" asked Colonel Brooke.

"Of course I do. The accusation is childish. If you wish to proceed on suppositions, it would be more reasonable to suppose that Señor Garjo had hired that man to kill Mr. Horton, or that he had retained the deed, and had refused to give it up when he learned that Mr. Horton was dead. In point of fact, I am the only one who has been swindled by the transaction, for I purchased part of that land from Señor Garjo, and received a deed for it, which is in that man's pocket. He robbed me of it, and then sought to murder me."

Search was made, and a deed was found on the person of Gurteh, as Brasse had represented.

"You see that my words are proved true," he continued. "I will have satisfaction out of some of you for these insults, for I am a gentleman, and as good as any of you."

"Are you sure that you are a gentleman?" said Mr. Lowndes, as he stepped forward. "There is a great deal of difference between a gentleman and a jail-bird. You may brazen it out as you please, Mr. Howard Brasse, if that is the name you now choose to be called, but there is no use of lying any more. Miss Horton has had a narrow escape from this fellow, gentlemen, for he has been one of the most notorious forgers and counterfeiters in Mississippi. It was only a few months ago that he was sentenced to the penitentiary, and he made his escape while he was being carried there."

"There is no use in talking to him any more," said Mr. Horton, "and the only question is, what shall be done with him. I am very well satisfied in learning that Miss Horton is safe, and that she has recovered the title to her property. Walter, why do you not congratulate Helen?"

"I am not sure that she requires congratulation," coldly replied that young gentleman. "Since that man yonder has proved to be not the owner of Los Sancillos, but a convicted felon, I suppose she will not be as anxious to marry him as she was a while ago."

"What do you mean?" quickly asked Helen, with flushed face and indignant glance. "Why do you say that I was anxious to marry that man?"

"Simply because you told me so, in the letter that you wrote, and sent to me by him."

"What letter? I never wrote you a line in my life."

"You must have a short memory. Here is the letter."

"It is my handwriting, or very like it," said Helen, as she looked at the letter; "but it is certain that I did not write it. You were entirely too ready to believe wrong of me, Mr. Brooke."

"This matter is easily explained," suggested Mr. Lowndes. "Ben Spidell, or Howard Brasse, has the reputation of being able to imitate any handwriting that he wishes to imitate."

"Don't quarrel with Walter about it, Helen," said Colonel

Brooke, "for any one would have been deceived by that letter. Now, Juan, I would like to know how it happened that you were on hand to rescue Miss Horton and bring her back."

"Miss Bettie is responsible for it, as she sent me," blushingly replied the young ranchero.

"I was not aware that she had so much influence over you. This must be looked into. Come, gentlemen, let us go to my house, and see if we can console Mrs. Horton for her disappointment of this morning."

Two men were left to bury the body of Jack Gartel, and the remainder went with Colonel Brooke, and took Howard Brasse with them, after tying him upon his horse, a proceeding to which he objected strongly but vainly.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

JUDGE DEEMS was cosily seated in Pete Barham's tavern, discussing the affairs of the country, and of the Republic of Texas in particular, over some of the landlord's best brandy, when the door opened, and old Bill Syee entered, looking as long and lank as ever, though not quite so haggard and downcast.

The old hunter placed his rifle against the side of the house, and seated himself on a stool near the judge, who kindly invited him to share his brandy.

"I reckon I mought as well," replied Bill, "as I hev come to talk business with you. The fact is, judge, I came to see you about that hangin'. I would hev been along afore, but I hev been right busy lately, lookin' arter my boy, and sech."

"That is right, Bill. I am glad to see that you didn't forget it. That matter has been runnin' on a long while now, and it is high time it was settled. I suppose you are ready and willin' to fix it up now?"

"In coarse I am. It don't seem adzackly right, somehow, but what has got to be must be. I am ready to do what the law says, and what you and the balance of the crowd say."

"I am glad to hear you say so. I always believed, Bill, that you were an honest man, and that you would keep your word, though you did disapp'nt us twice after givin' your promise. Are you at all particular about the day? It ought not to be put off any longer, or people will forget what you are to be hanged for. They are mighty forgetful here in Texas."

"Any day will suit me now, I reckon. If I hev got to be hanged, the sooner it is over with the better, though I am afraid my boy won't like it, any way you kin fix it."

"It is a principle of law, Bill, that every man owes duties to society, and one of those duties is, to come up and be hanged whenever he is called upon to do so, especially when he has been sentenced. Take another drop of the brandy. A man mustn't trouble himself about his connections, when he owes duties to society. As you gave us so much trouble afore, I reckon I had better set the day this time. It is my business to do it, anyhow."

"What's that you are sayin'?" asked Pete Barham, who had been busy among his barrels and bottles. "Are you talkin' about hangin' old Bill Syce, judge?"

"Yes. That business has been goin' loose a long time, and now he has come up like a man, and says that he is ready to settle it."

"I thought it was all settled, when it was proved that he didn't kill Mr. Horton."

"Not a bit of it, Peter. The other man was shot, without having a chance to be hanged, and that was the fault of Bill Syce. Besides, he has been tried, convicted and sentenced, and that ain't any law on airth to keep him from bein' hanged."

"That seems mighty queer, when you know that he is innocent. I don't believe in hangin' innocent men, judge."

"Don't you go to set yourself up ag'inst the law, Pete Barham. The law is just as I told you, and it says that when a man has been convicted and sentenced he must be hanged. It has got to be done, if we ever mean to have any law in Texas. What day do you think would suit for the hangin', Pete?"

"I ain't ready to speak to that p'nt jest now. Here comes Colonel Brooke. Let us ask him what he thinks about it."

"What is the matter?" asked the Colonel, as he entered.

"Judge Deems is talkin' about hangin' old Bill Syce," replied Barham.

"He must be joking."

"Thar's no joke about it, Colonel Brooke," retorted the judge. "He has been tried and convicted and sentenced, and thar's no law to keep him from bein' hanged."

"That is true, I suppose; but it is not absolutely necessary to hang an innocent man. We can make application to the President, and I think it will not be difficult to obtain a pardon."

After some discussion, it was agreed that this plan should be adopted, and old Bill Syce went his way, better satisfied, if not a happier man.

The pardon was obtained; but Judge Deems could never be persuaded that the old hunter ought not to have been hanged, "according to law." Whenever thereafter the laws seemed to be powerless to protect property or to punish crime, he would refer to this case, and solemnly declare to his auditors that such an opportunity for establishing the reign of law and order had been lost, by suffering old Bill Syce to go unhang'd, as would never again present itself.

When Mrs. Horton discovered how she had been deceived by Howard Brasse, and learned the truth in regard to the murder of her husband, she was so overcome by chagrin and excitement, that she could do nothing but go into a fit of hysterics, which lasted several days; but she was finally consoled by being assured that the successful swindler would get his deserts.

Walter Brooke did not have much difficulty in making his peace with Helen Horton, and it was not long before he obtained the consent of her mother, and there was a grand wedding at his father's house.

Señor Garjo, indignant at the loss of the deed that Helen had taken, went to wreak his spite upon Howard Brasse, by accusing him of the murder of Mr. Horton. When he learned the true state of the case, he was fain to make as many apologies as he could, and to vacate the hacienda of Los Sancillos in time for Walter and Helen to enter it.

Howard Brasse was kept in custody until Mr. Lowndes was ready to return, when he was sent in charge of that

gentleman and two good men, to serve his sentence in Mississippi.

Bettie Brooke pronounced Juan Salas to be a real hero for his conduct in effecting the rescue of Helen Horton, and she encouraged him to ask her father for her hand.

Juan's suit was ably seconded by Walter and Helen, and Colonel Brooke was finally persuaded to bestow his pearl of great price upon the young ranchero, who proved himself fully worthy of her. Juan remained in charge of the colonel's estate, after Walter went to reside at Los Sancillos.

Ben Sycé was installed as superintendent of the Sancillos property, and managed the farm to Walter's satisfaction.

His father had a home with him, on the estate, until his death, and was always a special favorite with Walter and Helen. It is probable that his life was really as useful as his death would have been, if he had been hanged according to the sentence of Judge Deems' court.

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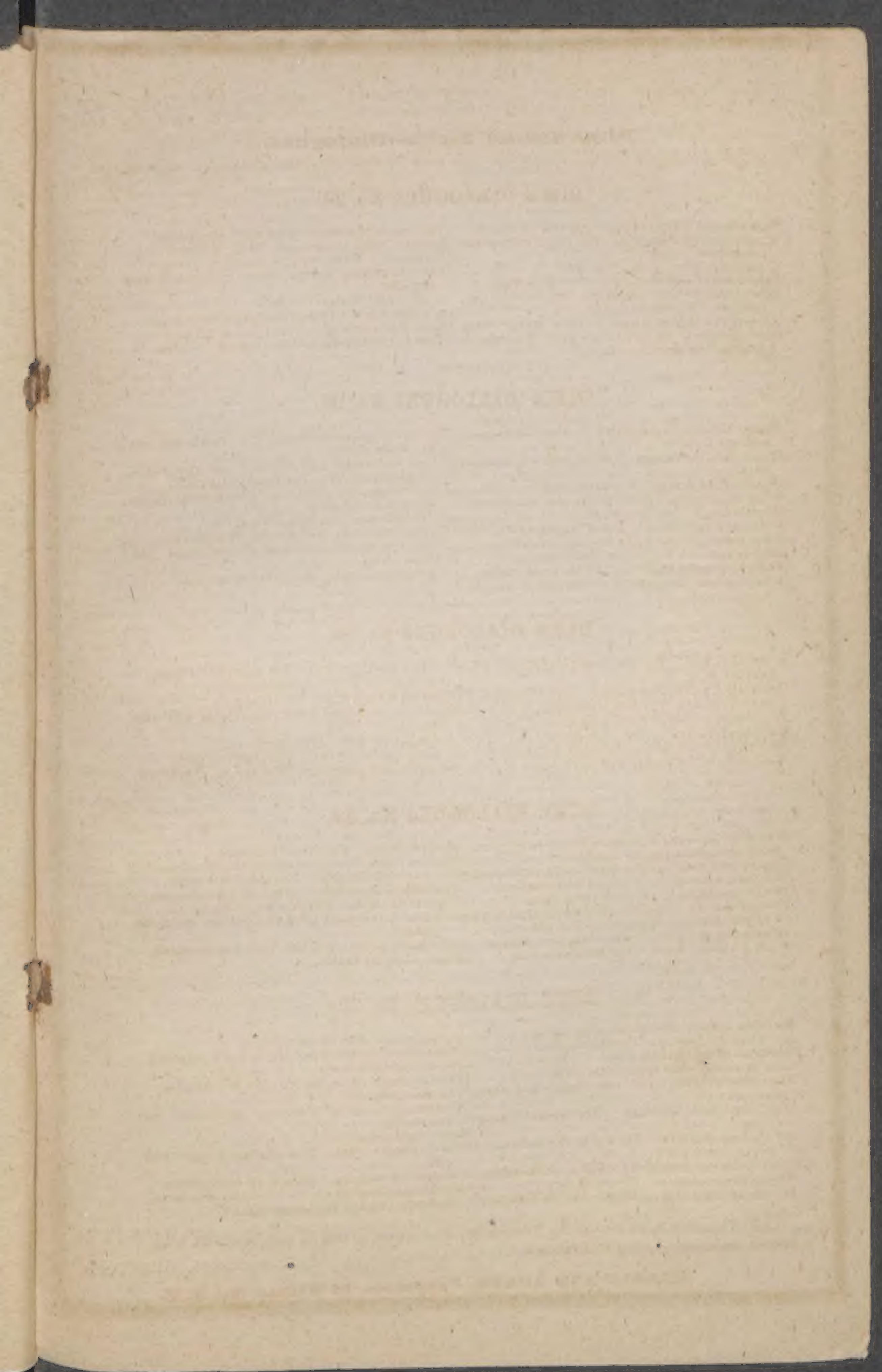
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